The Mahabharata as a Strategic Guide: Exploring its Relevance to Modern Principles of War

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ABSTRACT

The Mahabharata narrates events and aftermath of the Kurukshetra War, which revolves around perpetual conflict between good and evil, represented by the Pandava and Kaurava brothers of the legendary Bharata dynasty, respectively. The article explores how The Mahabharata, with a profound repository of prudent thoughts and battle tactics, serves as a strategic guide for the military, presenting insights that align with modern principles of war. The Kurukshetra War, the central conflict in the Sanskrit epic, offers a plenitude of strategic lessons that reverberate with modern military doctrines and principles outlined by theorists like Carl von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. Using comparative and descriptive analysis of secondary sources, the research investigates key strategic dimensions such as Shalya's implementation of psychological warfare tactics, Lord Krishna's exemplary war leadership apparent in his strategic counsel, including the Bhagavad Gita discourse, Guru Drona's sophisticated battle formations (Vyuha Rachana), and Bheeshma Pitamah's application of proportional force through controlled engagement, and strategic exclusion of Karna from combat operations. Lord Krishna's diplomatic maneuvers and tactical propaganda emulate modern-day asymmetric warfare and intelligence operations. Dharma Yuddha (righteous war) perception is scrutinized in the context of just war theory, highlighting ethical dilemma that persistently challenges contemporary military leaders. These strategies are analyzed for their theoretical foundations and practical applications within the context of ancient Eastern military doctrine. In doing so, the study explores lessons on leadership motivation, ethical decision-making, and the strategic relevance of war, positioning it as a substantial resource for military scholars, strategists, and policymakers.

Introduction

Whenever there is a decline in righteousness (dharma) and a rise in unrighteousness (adharma), I manifest myself on Earth, O Arjuna, to protect the virtuous, destroy the wicked, and reestablish dharma.

Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1986, 4.7.

The *Mahabharata*, one of the *Sanskrit* epics of eastern civilization, is often disregarded as a strategic text and is seldom examined through the lens of military strategy. Regardless of its mythological dimensions, *the Mahabharata* recommends philosophical warfare, leadership, motivation, deception, and ethics**,** building it a relevant study for contemporary military

thoughts (Singh, 2017). Warfare has played a fundamental role in determining the evolution of human civilization. From struggles to modern conflicts in ancient time, the principles of war have evolved but remain entrenched in the fundamental strategic doctrines such as objective, mass, maneuver, unity of command, and moral legitimacy (Ginter, 2023). While literatures, including Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Karl Von Clausewitz's *On War* are extensively considered influential works in military strategy (Roy, 2012), this supremacy has also led to the relative disregard of indigenous Eastern strategic traditions, particularly those embedded in the Mahabharata.

The central conflict in the *Mahabharata*, the Kurukshetra War, between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, embodies struggle between good and evil, and serves as a microcosm of military formations, psychological warfare, ethical dilemmas guided by Just War Theory, leadership dynamics, principles of war, strategic brilliance, and the importance of motivation (Rajagopal, 2024). Warfare is not merely about brute force but also about intelligence, adaptability, and ethical principles. Such a broader conceptual frame is further substantiated by the manner in which the Kurukshetra War was conducted, particularly in terms of duration, strategy, and ethical regulation.

The Kurukshetra War lasted eighteen days, with both sides employing well-organized and strategic battle formations, deception, and psychological warfare to gain the initiative (Hiltebeitel, 2011). The *Mahabharata* aligns with Just War Theory that postulates that the war must not be waged for personal vengeance or greed. It should be meant for lasting peace, self-defense, and righteousness (*dharma*); it should rather be the last resort of conflict. In the meantime, the ethical framework imposes moral constraints on the conduct of war, including the protection of non-combatants and adherence to agreed laws of war.

The epic illustrates that the war advanced military organization and weapons relative to its historical context. The armies were structured as *chaturangi sena* comparing four dimensions (Kangle, 1963): *Padati* (Infantry) *Ashwarohi* (Cavalry), *Gajarohi* (Elephants, analogous to modern artillery), and *Ratharohi* (Chariots, analogous to armored vehicles). Similarly, the modern four-dimensional forces of Army, Navy, Air Force, and Missile/Artillery systems resemble those military concepts and structures of military institution in the *Mahabharata*. Likewise, the *Divyastra* (divine weapons) wielded by heroes is the prototype of modern Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (U.S. Army War College, 2018). In that sense, one can deduce that sophisticated strategic thought and technological innovations were applied to warfare ever since ancient times.

Despite being numerically inferior, commanding seven *Akshauhinis* (1,530,900 troops) compared to Kauravas' eleven *Akshauhinis* (2,405,700 troops), the Pandavas emerged victorious (Vyasa, 1983). Their success was not due to superior numbers, but to superior strategy, shrewd alliances, psychological warfare, and the guidance of Lord Krishna, their strategic mentor (Singh, 2017). Organization of armed forces as per the *Mahabharata* is shown in Annex "A". These organizational structures and technological features become particularly significant when examined in relation to the outcomes of the conflict.

Both the conflicting forces in the *Mahabharata* applied various strategies and tactics for victory in the war. One of the most popular strategic formations organized by renowned teacher Dronacharya on behalf of Kauravas was *Chakravyuha* (Spiral Wheel Formation). In the

formation, son of Arjuna and one of the generals (*Maharathi*), was trapped and killed brutally after disobeying the agreed laws of war in the Kurukshetra conflict (Temple Purohit, n.d.). Strategic formations (*Vyuhas*) as described in the *Mahabharata* are shown in Annex "B". The effectiveness of these strategic advantages is further illustrated through the specific tactics and battle formations employed during the war.

Through the study of military strategies, tactics, and moral debates in the *Mahabharata*, the study addresses the critical gap in military scholarship, providing insights into historical battlefield tactics and their relevance to modern military doctrines. It showcases examples of strategic leadership and decision-making while examining *Dharma Yuddha* (righteous war) versus pragmatism. By analyzing these examples, the study connects ancient strategic and logical reasoning with contemporary discussions on military leadership and decision-making. In this paper, the research contributes to broader discussions on ethical warfare, leadership under moral constraints, and the integration of indigenous strategic thought into modern military education.

Hierarchical Relationship of Art of War in Military Science

Military Strategy: The highest level, involving overarching plans to achieve long-term political or military objectives through resource allocation and goal definition (Handel, 2001; Sun Tzu, 2018).

Military Campaign: A subset of strategy, comprising related operations designed to achieve a strategic objective within a specific theater or timeframe (Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], 2020; US Department of the Army, 2019).

Military Operations: A subset of a campaign, involving coordinated battles and maneuvers (offensive, defensive, or stability-focused) to achieve campaign goals (Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], 2020; US Department of the Army, 2019).

Military Tactics: The lowest level, focusing on small-unit actions, formations, and immediate combat decisions to win engagements (Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], 2020; US Department of the Army, 2019).

Guiding all these levels are the "Principles of War", which are foundational doctrines derived from historical analysis, military theory, and human psychology. This structure ensures tactical actions support operational goals, which in turn fulfill campaign objectives to achieve the ultimate strategic aim (Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], 2020; US Department of the Army, 2019).

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual, explanatory, and comparative enquiry. Primary sources include the *Mahabharata* and authoritative English translations, whereas secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed scholarly works, military doctrines, strategic studies literature, and academic journal articles. The methodological approach involves systematic examination of strategic decision-making, leadership dynamics, military organization, and ethical reasoning as depicted in the *Mahabharata*. These elements are then critically analyzed in relation to established principles of modern military thoughts

and doctrines. Specific consideration is given to frequent strategic themes such as deception, alliance formation, morale and motivation, operational adaptability, and ethical restraint in warfare. Precisely, the study seeks to identify lasting strategic concepts embedded within the epic and evaluates their relevance and applicability to contemporary military planning, leadership education, and ethical discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study integrates classical military theory, Eastern strategic thought and literary philosophical analysis enabling a multidimensional examination of the *Mahabharata* as a strategic text.

Strategic Studies and Military Theory

The study incorporates foundational Western military theory, particularly Carl Von Clausewitz's conception of war as a continuation of politics by other means. These theoretical perspectives provide a structured lens through which the strategic conduct of the Kurukshetra war — especially the use of maneuver, deception, and morale— can be analyzed and contextualized within the modern military doctrine.

Eastern Strategic Thought

Sun Tzu's emphasis on deception, psychological warfare, and indirect approaches provides military perspectives and Kautilya's Arthashastra offers a lens for understanding statecraft and realpolitik, alliance management, and the strategic use of power. The tension between "*Dharma*" (righteous duty) and "*Neeti*" (pragmatic policy) is central to this analysis, particularly in relation to the epic's ethical dilemmas.

Literary and Philosophical Perspectives

Narrative investigation reveals the strategic lessons rooted within the text. However, moral philosophy offers a framework for examining the ethical dilemmas confronted by characters, exemplified by Arjuna's dilemma in the Bhagavad Gita. This dual perspective allows for a nuanced exploration of leadership, responsibility, and the ethical limits of the violence.

Furthermore, this framework empowers a comparative analysis of the Mahabharata with modern strategic principles, exemplifying its continued significance in modern military doctrines and political thoughts. This approach demonstrates the epic's enduring relevance to contemporary military strategy, leadership education, ethical reasoning, and political-military decision making.

Results and Discussion

The Kurukshetra War: A Strategic Overview

The Kurukshetra War serves as a theoretical demonstration of multiple military strategies. It featured complex strategic formations (*Vyuhas*) like the "*Chakravyuha*", which are comparable to modern military maneuvers (Roy, 2012). The war was also characterized by deception and psychological tactics, with Lord Krishna acting as the ultimate strategist and manipulator, akin to a modern intelligence chief (Sharma, n.d.). Furthermore, the epic presents divergent leadership styles from Lord Krishna's wisdom and Bheeshma Pitamah's ethical duty to Duryodhana's ego-driven authoritarianism highlighting the critical impact of leadership on war outcomes (Payyanur, 2024).

The Modern Principles of War

Nations have codified principles of war to guide military planning and execution. While lists vary, they share common themes.

Core Principles (US/NATO)

The US and NATO recognize nine core principles:

1. Objective (clear, achievable goals)
2. Offensive (seize initiative)
3. Mass (concentrate combat power)
4. Economy of Force (allocate minimum to secondary efforts)
5. Maneuver (gain positional advantage)
6. Unity of Command (one responsible commander)
7. Security (prevent enemy advantage)
8. Surprise (strike when unprepared)
9. Simplicity (clear, uncomplicated plans) (United States Marine Corps, 2015)

Additional principles for broader operations include

1. Restraint
2. Perseverance
3. Legitimacy

British/Commonwealth Principles

British and Commonwealth doctrines emphasize the following: selection and maintenance of aim, maintenance of morale, offensive action, security, surprise, concentration of force (mass), economy of effort, flexibility, cooperation, sustainability and legitimacy (Sajithkumar, 2016).

Chinese Principles of War

Chinese doctrine blends ancient philosophy with modern military thought. Traditional principles from Sun Tzu include knowing yourself and the enemy, avoiding strength and striking weakness, deception, speed and surprise, winning without fighting and flexibility. Modern People's Liberation Army (PLA) principles emphasize active defense, integrated joint operations, system destruction warfare, information dominance and strategic deception (Sun Tzu, 2018).

These principles are not rigid. Nevertheless, they require judgment to balance and apply effectively in dynamic environments and continue to evolve with technological and geopolitical shifts.

Nepali Adoption on Principles of War

Nepal's military principles of war are influenced by its unique geography, history, and strategic culture (Adhikari, 2017). While Nepal does not have an official, codified doctrine like Western nations, its military strategies are shaped by historical experiences, particularly the unification campaigns of Prithvi Narayan Shah of 18th century (Stiller, 1968). The principle of "No

aggression first, don't let go the aggressor" (*Jai katak nagarnu, jhiki katak garnu*) underpins Nepal's foreign policy and military strategy, as discussed in the divine counsel *Divyopadesh* (Shah, 1775/2020).

According to proposed doctrine the Nepalese Army 2014, Nepal's principles of war are similar to famous ten principles of war adopted by Britain and commonwealth nations. Instead of sustainability doctrine, the Nepali Army recognizes administration as tenth principle. Basically, the Nepali Army adopts defensive, non-aligned, and focused on sovereignty, disaster response, and UN peacekeeping. It tries to avoid hardline posturing and relies on diplomatic engagement and strategic balancing instead (Ministry of Defence, Government of Nepal, 2020; Nepali Army, 2014).

Unity and National Pride

Nepal's military principles are inspired by the King Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification campaign of Nepal. This principle emphasizes national unity and loyalty as the foundation of military strength. The Gorkhali army's success against larger forces, accomplished through strong morale and cohesion exemplifies the importance of national unity and pride (Farwell, 1984).

Guerrilla Warfare

Nepal's mountainous terrain favors hit-and-run tactics, ambushes, and asymmetric warfare. Despite inferior numbers Nepali forces exploited terrain and local obstacles to resist superior British forces in the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814 –1816 (Pradhan, 1991).

Deception and Surprise

Unexpected attacks and efforts to mislead enemy was the characteristics of Nepali warfare in unification campaign. Prithvi Narayan Shah's use of feigned retreats and night attacks during unification campaigns provides notable examples of this principle (Lamichhane, 2025).

Mobility and Adaptability

Gorkhali soldiers' ability to traverse hilly terrain rapidly and maneuver conventional armies was a hallmark of Prithvi Narayan Shah's strategy. This demonstrates the emphasis on rapid movement and operational agility across difficult terrain (Shrestha, 2020).

Terrain Exploitation

Nepal's military doctrine heavily relies on mountain warfare, using ridges, valleys, and forests for defensive advantage (Nepal Army, 2015). Constructing small forts on the top of the hills and fighting from the high grounds was the modus operandi of Nepali troops. In the Battle of Nalapani, Balbhadra Kunwar successfully held off the British using fortifications on high ground, exemplifying this principle (English, 1985).

Psychological Warfare

The Gorkhali soldiers' skillful use of the traditional Nepali knife (*Khukuri*) in World War battles instilled fear in opponents. The reputation of Gorkha was deliberately leveraged to demoralize enemies before engagement (Lyons, 2023).

Diplomacy and Alliances

Balanced diplomacy and foreign policy, guided by King Prithvi Narayan Shah's "Yam between two boulders" policy allowed Nepal to maintain sovereignty even after Sugauli treaty of 1816 with British India (Acharya, 2016).

Civil-Military Integration

The Nepali Army frequently engages in disaster relief and development projects, maintaining public trust (Nepal Army Headquarters, 2015). Earthquake rescue operations by the Nepali Army after Gorkha Earthquake of 2015 reinforced military-civilian bonds (Shrestha & Adhikari, 2017). Nepal blends historical guerrilla tactics, mountain warfare expertise, and diplomatic pragmatism in its principles of war (Khanal, 2018). In contrast to western doctrines, Nepal emphasizes flexibility, terrain mastery, and psychological impact over sheer firepower. These principles continue to shape Nepal's defense strategy in modern times.

Modern Parallels in the *Mahabharata*

Objective or Selection and maintenance of Aim (*Lakshya*)

The Kurukshetra War, also known as the *Mahabharata* War or *Dharma Yuddha* (righteous war), had a clearly defined objective for both sides (Hiltebeitel, 2001). In the epic, the Pandavas primarily intend to restore *dharma* (righteous rule) by defeating the unjust Kauravas (Ganguli, 1883 -1896). Despite thirteen years of exile, the Pandavas resisting distractions, focused on regaining their kingdom. At the same point, Lord Krishna made constant efforts to reconcile differences between the Pandavas and the Kauravas; nevertheless, he could not help them break the peace deal. He then approaches Hastinapur to negotiate peace (Matilal, 2002). Even so, the Pandavas were prepared to engage in war if justice was denied. In contrast, the Kauravas' objective was to retain power at any cost.

Indecisive warrior such as Barbarik (Son of *Ghatotkacha* and grandson of *Bheema*) was denied participation in the war. Barbarik possessed three divine arrows which could have ended the war within moments, however his commitment to fight from the weaker side would have compromised the aim of *Dharma Yuddha*, had he participated in the war, thus he did not partake in the battlefield (Chopra, 1988–1990; Pattanaik, 2010). Similarly, Balaram (Lord Krishna's elder brother) voluntarily abstained due to indecision (Sharma, 2009) and Vidura, opposed to the war on ethical grounds, resigned from his executive post and kept himself away.

Offensive (*Aakraman*)

On the thirteenth day of the Kurukshetra War, the Army Chief of Kauravas (Guru Dronacharya) constructed a strategic Spiral Wheel Formation (*Chakravyuha*) to capture Yudhishthira by isolating him from his brothers and other warriors. Abhimannyu's partially informed effort to penetrate the *Chakravyuha* exemplifies offensive action (Ganguli, 1883 – 1896). Although Arjuna was the only warrior fully capable of breaking the labyrinth trap, he was deceived and engaged elsewhere by Kaurava forces, while Jayadrath blocked support from the other Pandava warriors (Roy, 1884 – 1896). Abhimanyu succeeded in breaching the intricate maze, but was ultimately trapped and killed by seven enemy warriors, in violation of established war protocols.

On the fourteenth day, Arjuna vowed to kill Jayadrath before sunset, who was recognized as the key warrior responsible for isolating Abhimannyu. Using a flanking attack and aggressive hit-and-run chariot charges, Arjuna killed seven Akshauhini senas (1,530,900 warriors, including several key figures) single-handedly (Sukthankar, 1933–1966). This episode reflects a classic example of offensive strategy employed by the Pandavas.

Other notable examples include Bheema's elimination of all hundred Kauravas (Ganguli, 1883 – 1896), Ghatotkacha use in night raid (Roy, 1884 – 1896), the use of Bheema and Satyaki to clear path for Arjuna to reach Jayadrath on fourteenth day war (Sukthankar, 1933 – 1966), Karna's aggressive battlefield postures (Mani, 1975), Bheeshma Pitamah's formidable offensive compelled Lord Krishna to deploy weapons, despite his personal vow of non-violence (Matilal, 2002).

Concentration of Force or Mass

The strategic formation of the *Chakravyuha*, one of the most famous formations in the Mahabharata posits an early understanding of the principle of concentration of force or mass. It emphasizes the concentration of superior combat power at decisive points to isolate and destroy the enemy in detail. A wide variety of strategic formations, numbering more than a dozen, were employed in the Kurukshetra war, was ultimately isolated, trapped, and killed in the *Chakravyuha* (Vyasa, 1983). In *Chakrvyuha* designated to trap Yudhisthira, Guru Dronacharya's concentrated several warriors and a significant mass of force to execute this mission (Singh, 2018).

Unity of Command

The Pandavas was united under the supreme strategist Lord Krishna, with the youthful and widely acknowledged Dhrishtadyumna serving as their commander-in-chief. In contrast, the Kauravas were unofficially divided into two factions. One included wise and experienced elders such as Bheeshma pitamah, Guru Dronacharya, and Guru Kripacharya, while the other comprised younger plotters led by their maternal uncle Shakuni, along with Duryodhana, Karna, Dushasana, and others. (Vyasa, 1983). Leadership in the Kaurava camp changed rapidly: four warriors—Bhishma Pitamah, Guru Dronacharya, Karna, and Shalya—assumed the role of *senapati* (commander-in-chief) during the eighteen-day war (Ganguli, 1883 – 1896).

Economy of Effort

Gaining maximum outcome with minimum use of force is the main principle of war. In the *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna decided not to fight but offers himself as a non-combatant charioteer, while his army was to fight for the Kauravas (Hiltebeitel, 2001; Singh, 2019). Through guidance delivered via the *Bhagavad Gita* (Mishra, 2017), Krishna influenced key events such as Bhishma Pitamah's fall, Karna's defeat, and Duryodhana's death. His strategic interventions achieved high impact at zero personal military expenditure.

On the fourteenth day of Kurukshetra war, Ghatotkacha, son of Bheema was deployed at night when his powers are strongest (Vyasa, 1983). His illusion-based warfare (Maya Yuddha) created massive chaos in the Kaurava camp, compelling Karna to use his divine Shakti weapon, originally reserved for Arjuna (Ganguli, 1883 – 1896). This deliberate sacrifice of a demon

warrior to neutralize a future threat to Arjuna validates the strategic use of a specialized asset to destabilize and abolish the enemy's advantage.

Similarly, Bheema focused himself on fulfilling his vows and did not waste his energy on less important targets for strategic gain. He killed Duryodhana, Dushasana, including all Kauravas to destroy core leadership of the Kaurava camp (Minkowski, 2014). His concentrateduse of personal force was invaluable for strategic outcomes (Hiltebeitel, 2001).

Maneuver (Chhala)

Both sides employed maneuvers to deceive the opponent. More than dozens of strategic formations (*Vyuhas*) were deployed throughout the Kurukshetra war (Vyasa, 1983). One of the renowned formations (*Vyuha*) used by Pandavas was *Kraunch Vyuha* (Heron formaton) for flexibility (Bose, 1986). Arjuna's flanking attack with surprise to kill Jayadrath, the king of Sindhu was another efficient maneuver, executed according to strategic design of Lord Krishna (Minkowski, 2016).

Surprise (Apratyasit)

Lord Krishna's counsel facilitated unexpected tactics properly aligned with strategic relevance. Such tactical alerts include Arjuna using Shikhandi as his shield (kavach) to defeat Bhishma Pitamah and employing smoke to obscure sunlight, creating the illusion of sunset to kill Jayadrath (Vyasa, 1983). Conversely, a surprise night attack by Aswatthama on the Pandava camp partially failed. Although *Aswatthama*, assisted by Kripacharya and Kritavarma, killed the *upa-Pandavas* (sons of the Pandavas), the primary objective of eliminating the sleeping Pandavas remained unresolved (Ganguli, 1883 -1896).

Security

Both the Pandava and the Kaurava sides employed organized intelligence and counterintelligence mechanisms during the eighteen-day war. On the Kaurava side, Shakuni headed the intelligence apparatus and played a central role in espionage and strategic deception (Minkowski, 2018). On the Pandava side, intelligence procedures were conducted under the strategic guidance of Lord Krishna, with the youngest Pandava, Sahadeva, entrusted with leading and executing intelligence-related activities throughout the Kurukshetra War (Singh, 2019). Collection of intelligence thus emerged as an important preparatory act of the commander in war.

Arjuna's safety was paramount to the Pandavas. Lord Krishna's role as a charioteer provided both physical protection and strategic guidance during battles. Prior to the war and during their exile, the Kauravas employed spies to monitor the Pandavas' movements and intentions, reflecting practices akin to Kautilya's emphasis on espionage and surveillance in statecraft (Singh, 2017). Furthermore, the deployment of diverse strategic formations, the calculated use of Ghatotkacha—compelling Karna to expend his most powerful divine weapon on him rather than on Arjuna—and the careful concealment of Karna's true identity until the later stages of the war collectively contributed to maintaining Pandava cohesion and security at critical junctures of the conflict (Subramaniam, 2007).

Simplicity

The principle of simplicity emphasises clear, concise plans and orders that are easily understood and executed, thereby reducing confusion amid the chaos of battle. Although the *Mahabharata* depicts highly complex strategies and formations, several decisive moments in the Kurukshetra War demonstrate the effectiveness of simple, unambiguous objectives. Lord Krishna's guidance to Arjuna consistently emphasized a singular focus: the fulfillment of duty in the service of dharma. Other notable examples include the clear directive to kill Jayadrath before sunset, the straightforward tactic of positioning Shikhandi in front of Bhishma Pitamah—knowing Bhishma would refuse to fight and thus become vulnerable—and the strategic dissemination of the (partially) false message regarding Ashwatthama's death to disarm Guru Dronacharya psychologically (Roy, 2012; Singh, 2017). Similarly, the final one-on-one duel between Bhima and Duryodhana reduced the war's complexity to a decisive and comprehensible conclusion, reinforcing the strategic value of simplicity in achieving final victory (Vyasa, n.d.).

Restraint (Comparable to Ahimsa and Kshama)

Restraint functioned as an implicit code of conduct or laws of war in the Kurukshetra. Combatants were generally prohibited from attacking unarmed, retreating, or wounded opponents, reflecting ethical limitations on violence even amid total war (Roy, 2012). Bheeshma Pitamah and Lord Krishna both exemplified restraint as Bheeshma Pitamah refused to fight women (Shikhandi) or someone not recognize as a legitimate warrior, and ultimately laid down his arms, accepting death on a bed of arrows rather than violating his ethical code (Singh, 2017). Lord Krishna despite being the most powerful warrior, vowed not to use any weapon in the war and participated solely as a charioteer and strategist, demonstrating profound self-restraint throughout the war (Subramaniam, 2007). The epic consistently condemns excess and emphasizes the regulation of anger, ego, and the desire for vengeance. Even in warfare, the *Mahabharata* underscores that ethical boundaries must not be transgressed, reinforcing the moral dimension of strategic conduct (Roy, 2012).

Perseverance (Comparable to Tapas or Sthitapragya)

Perseverance emerges as a central moral and strategic virtue in the *Mahabharata*. Despite prolonged exile and repeated temptations, Yudhishthira's maintains unwavering commitment to *Dharma* (righteousness) that exemplifies ethical endurance. Similarly, Arjuna's internal struggle in the *Bhagavad Gita* reflects the necessity of maintaining one's *Kshatriya* virtue amidst moral dilemma and filial piety. Bheema's sustained commitment to his vow of retaliation—fulfilled over many years–demonstrates his physical resilience and emotional balance. Collectively, these narratives affirm that the moral path of warfare is arduous, and perseverance in the pursuit of *Dharma* constitutes a warrior's ultimate test of character and resolve (Hiltebeitel, 2011).

Legitimacy (Comparable to Dharma, Nyaya, and Adhikara)

The war was legitimized by the Pandavas as a reinstatement of righteousness (*dharma*) and the recovery of rightful independence (Hiltebeitel, 2016). Yudhishthira's refusal to be connected in deception early on, and his later moral agony over infringement of war ethics, reflect the continuous conflict between practical inevitability and moral legitimacy (Matilal, 2002). The concept of lawful authority or right to rule (*adhikara*) to the epic's ethical framework (Roy,

2012). A war is righteous or justified only if fought for justice and truth, not for personal gain, ambition, or revenge (Bowles, 2007).

Additional Strategic Lessons from the Mahabharata

Psychological Warfare (*Manovaigyanik yuddha*)

Psychological warfare played a decisive role in shaping the outcome of the Kurukshetra War. Lord Krishna enhanced Arjuna's morale by motivating him with the help of Bhagavad Gita's verses. Right before the war, demotivated and depressed Arjuna was hesitant to fight against his own clan, however, persuasion and spiritual counseling by Lord Krishna gave him impetus to undertake through war (Malinar, 2007). Following this moral revitalization, Arjuna went on to defeat several renowned warriors, including Bhishma Pitamah, Jayadratha, and Karna, while strategically neutralizing Guru Dronacharya by rendering him psychologically disarmed. Krishna's disclosure of Karna's true lineage on the eve of his appointment as the Kaurava army commander significantly undermined Karna's morale and sense of purpose (McGrath, 2004). Similarly, the strategic appointment of Shalya, the King of Madra as Karna's charioteer to discourage Karna and praise Pandavas served as a deliberate psychological tactic to weaken Kaurava resolve (Brodbeck, 2009). The dissemination of the news Aswatthama (Son of Guru Dronacharya)'s death made Guru Dronacharya demoralized and self-disarmed was marked a critical psychological turning point and significantly hastened the Kaurava forces' decline in Kurukshetra War (Roy, 2012).

Alliances and Diplomacy (*Sandhi*)

Both the conflicting parties persistently pursued greater alliances to strengthen their respective strategic positions. On the one hand, Pandavas secured Lord Krishna's leadership, diplomacy and strategy while Kauravas secured support of (Narayani sena) (Singh, 2017). Although the number of warriors with Pandavas was less than that of Kauravas, the former compensated this gap with their superior coalition management, unity of purpose, and the strategic value of key allies.

On the other hand, Kauravas**,** under leadership of Duryodhana, boasted their superiority with the number of warriors (Singh, 2017). Duryodhana was able to secure alliances with many powerful kingdoms and warriors, some of whom joined out of loyalty, others due to debt**,** fear**,** or enmity with Pandavas (Roy, 2012). Despite the greater strength with many of the renowned warriors, Kauravas were defeated because Bheeshma Pitamah, Guru Dronacharya and Kripacharya fought for Kauravas out of a sense of duty rather than conviction for Duryodhana's cause (Matilal, 2002). Karna, though born a Pandava (eldest son of Kunti), remained loyal to Duryodhana out of gratitude for past patronage rather than ideological alignment, a loyalty that ultimately led to his downfall (McGrath, 2004). Shalya, the maternal uncle of the Pandavas, was deceived into supporting Kauravas and was later used strategically to undermine Karna's effectiveness (Brodbeck, 2009). These flawed alliances illustrate that superiority in number without moral legitimacy and unity of purpose is insufficient for sustained victory.

Strategic Superiority

The leadership and strategic superiority of Lord Krishna played decisive role in securing the Pandeva's victory in the war (Hiltebeitel, 2016). In contrast, Duryodhana's ego-driven decisions and rapid changes of leadership created confusions and declining morale within the Kaurava camp (Roy, 2012). Pandavas's adaptability, discipline, determination and clarity of purpose contributed significantly to their success (Vyasa, n. d.). The divisions of high value targets among key warriors were deliberate, justified and balanced. Above all, the selection and maintenance of goal proved central to the victory in Kurukshetra War by Pandavas (Broadbeck, 2009).

Art of War and Fog of War: Conceptual Parallels

Sun Tzu's "Art of War" mirrors many Mahabharata strategies like deception, terrain exploitation, and morale as decisive factors in warfare (Chakrabarti, 2017). Clausewitzian "Fog of War" parallels the uncertainty in Karna's chariot wheel becoming trapped or Abhimanyu's entrapment within the *Chakravyuha* (Mehta, 2019). Kautilya's Arthashastra also aligns with the *Mahabharata* in its treatment of asymmetric warfare, where Pandavas secured victory through superior strategy, leadership and motivation despite being comparatively weaker in strength (Singh, 2017). Pandavas' continuous adaptability to changing battle conditions reflects modern manoeuvre warfare doctrines. In this context, Lord Krishna's use of asymmetric tactics anticipates contemporary concepts of hybrid warfare (Leonhard, 2018). (Leonhard, 2018)**.** Lord Krishna's strategic use of deceptions is comparable to to modern psychological operations and misinformation campaigns, while the systematic employment of spies and intelligence gathering in the *Mahabharata* closely aligns with contemporary military intelligence doctrines (Hoffman, 2007). Lord Krishna's moral justifications for war resonates with modern just war theory, whereas Karna's ethical dilemmas illustrate tensions similar to those faced by modern soldiers when navigating conflicts between duty and personal values (Waltzer, 2015).

Laws of War adopted in the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata constitutes one of the earliest reflections on ethics of warfare. Although it is a legendary and mythical narrative, it restrains orientations to laws or codes of conduct in war popularly known as *Dharma Yuddha* (righteous war). The key laws of war articulated in the *Mahabharata* include the following (Vyasa, n. d.):

War was to be declared openly. Battles were to be fought from sunrise to sunset. A warrior was permitted to fight only an opponent of equal status, skill, and weaponry. Non-combatants were not targeted during the conflict. Weapons were to be employed appropriately in accordance with established rules of engagement. The use of celestial weapons (Divyastras) comparable to the weapons of mass destructions/ required ritual invocation, restraint, and accountability. Killing through deceit or trickery was condemned. Duels and personal combat engagements were to be honored once initiated. Care for the wounded and the performance of proper funeral rites for the fallen were considered obligatory.

While the Mahabharata upholds the ideal of ethical warfare through righteous war (*Dharma Yuddha)*, it simultaneously explores the tragic tensions that arise when moral ideals confront the harsh realities of war. The principles articulated in the *Mahabharata* later influenced

broader South Asian traditions of war ethics, including elements found in the *Manusmriti* and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (Kautilya, 1915; Olivelle, trans., 2005).

Conclusion

The *Mahabharata* emerges as a thoughtful production of strategic insight which offers endearing lessons in warfare, leadership, diplomacy and ethics beyond its mythological form. Kurukshetra war narrative provides a microcosm of military and political dynamics, exhibiting remarkable parallels with modern principles of war international relations theories, and socio-political governance. Its engagement with asymmetric warfare, psychological operations, alliance formation, and ethical dilemmas situates the epic firmly within the domain of strategic studies.

Lord Krishna's leadership correlates principles of modern maneuver warfare and hybrid tactics through the strategic amalgamation of diplomacy, deception, and targeted strikes. Key principles of war, such as objective (*Lakshya*), offensive action (*Aakraman*), and unity of command, closely resemble those articulated in contemporary NATO and U.S. military doctrines. The assassination of Guru Dronacharya with information asymmetry and killing of Grand Sire Bheeshma Pitamah by Arjuna on the cover of Shikhandi reflect early forms of psychological operations and intelligence-led warfare. Lord Krishna's realpolitik balancing pragmatic necessity with moral justification—illustrates ethical pragmatism analogous to modern just war theory.

The epic demonstrates the enduring insights into statecraft and governance. Yudhisthira represents moral authority (dharma) which contrasts Duryodhana's unrighteousness (adharma) driven pursuit of power, highlighting the instability of unjust rule. Lord Krishna's unsuccessful role of shantidoot (peace mission) to Hastinapur underscores the importance of exhausting diplomatic avenues before resorting to armed conflict.

Alliance politics in the *Mahabharata* further parallel modern international relations. The Pandavas' coalition with Panchala, Matsya, and Dvārakā demonstrates how weaker actors can balance stronger adversaries through strategic partnerships, while the Kauravas' fragmented command structure illustrates the dangers of divided authority. The ethical constraints of war including the prohibition of attacks on non-combatants, mandating daylight battles, and condemning deceit anticipate modern *jus in bello* norms.

The Mahabharata also resonates strongly with contemporary international relations theories. Lord Krishna's power-maximizing strategies including exploiting Karna's vulnerabilities is a reflect realism; Dharma as a normative framework shaping behaviour depicts constructivism and rules-based alliances and war codes line up with liberal institutionalism. As such, the epic stands as a sophisticated intellectual bridge between ancient strategic thought and modern political-military theory.

Ultimately, the Mahabharata should be understood not as a historical artifact but as a living strategic text. Its convergence with Sun Tzu's emphasis on deception and Clausewitz's "fog of war" demonstrates its timeless relevance. The epic offers a guide for navigating the complex interplay of power, morality, leadership, and human agency in both war and peace–an interplay that grows increasingly intricate in contemporary conflict environments.

Recommendations

The *Mahabharata* offers vital military strategies relatable to modern principles of war, and illuminates the importance of leadership, and morale in war. It provides ample case studies for military academies as a historical and literary model for understanding warfare. Following are recommendations to utilize Mahabharata in military contexts

Integration into Military Education

The *Mahabharata* can serve as a case-study text in military academies and war colleges to provide valuable insights on leadership, strategies, ethics, decision-making under uncertainty, and asymmetric warfare.

Leadership and Morale Studies

The epic highlights critical importance of leadership virtues, trustworthiness, cohesive command, and troop morale. These dimensions warrant structured inclusion in leadership development curricula.

Psychological and Ethical Dimensions of Warfare

The psychological struggles of figures such as Arjuna and Karna offer critical insights into combat psychology, moral injury, and the ethics of command responsibility in contemporary military contexts.

Strategic Ethics and Law of Armed Conflict

The concept of *Dharma Yuddha* presents an indigenous ethical framework comparable to contemporary laws of armed conflict including Geneva Conventions, meriting deeper comparative study.

Interdisciplinary Research

Scholars of military studies, political science, ethics, and international relations are encouraged to engage with the *Mahabharata* as a foundational text in global strategic thought.

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Army Organization in the Mahabharata

Unit/Formation	Equivalent to	Soldier	Horse/Rider	Elephant/Rider	Chariot/Rider
Patti/Section	1 X Section	5	3	1	1
Senamukh/Platoon	3 X Section	15	9	3	3
Gulma/Company	3 X Platoon	45	27	9	9
Gana/Battalion	3 X Company	135	81	27	27
Bahini/Brigade	3 X Battalion	405	243	81	81
Pritana/Division	3 X Brigade	1215	729	243	243
Chanu/Corps	3 X Division	2645	2187	729	729
Anikini/	3 X Corps	10935	6561	2187	2187
Akshauhini	10 X Anikini	109350	65610	21870	21870
Total Men in 1X Akshauhini	43740 (Non Combatants) 218700	109350	65610	21870 (Non Combatant/ Mahout) 21870	21870 (Non Combatant/Charioteer) 21870
Total Animal in 1 X Akshauhini			65610 Horses	21870 Elephants	43740 (Horses at least)

Kauravas Military Strength: 11 Akshauhini	2405700 Combatants	481140 Non Combatants	721710 Horses	240570 Elephants	240570 Chariots
Pandavas Military Strength: 7 Akshauhini	1530900 Combatants	306180 Non Combatants	459270 Horses	153090 Elephants	153090 Chariots
Grand Total 18 Akshauhini	**3936600 Combatants**	**787320 Non Combatants**	**1180980 Horses**	**393660 Elephants**	**393660 Chariots**

Troops involved in administrative job is not included

Arjuna alone killed 7 X Akshauhini of Kauravas

War lasted in 18 days

18 Akshauhini Participated

All the total and grand total number is divisible by 18

Source: Wisdom Library. (n.d.). Mahabharata 6.52-55: Battle formations (vyūha) of the Kurukshetra War.
https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/mahabharata-english-summary/d/doc1345937.html

Annex "B"

Formations (Vyuhas) Used in the Mahabharata (Kurukshetra War)

SN	Name	Used by	Day of War	Structure	Purpose	Weakness	Modern Parallel
1	Chakra Vyuha (Spiral Wheel Formation)	Dronacharya	13	Concentric rotating circles with overlapping layers.	Trap and isolate enemy warriors (e.g., Abhimanyu).		Swarming tactics in guerrilla warfare.
2	Padma Vyuha (Lotus Formation)	Bheeshma	4	Petal-like units radiating from a core.	Defensive encirclement with counterattack options.	Vulnerable to flanking (Pandavas used Krauncha Vyuha).	NATO's "defense in depth" strategy.
3	Makara Vyuha (Crocodile Formation)	Pandavas	7	Narrow frontal "snout" with hidden flanking jaws.	Lure enemies into a killing zone (e.g., against Bheeshma).		German Kesselschlacht (encirclement battles) in WWII.
4	Garuda Vyuha (Eagle Formation)	Arjuna	10	Spearhead center with "wings" for envelopment.	Rapid penetration of enemy lines (to rescue Yudhishthira).		US "shock and awe" blitzkrieg tactics.
5	Savatobhadra Vyuha (Omnidirectional Formation)	Kauravas	12	Square grid with 360° defense.	Protect weak units (e.g., Duryodhana) from all sides.	Static; Pandavas used fire arrows to create chaos.	Roman Testudo or urban combat squares.
6	Krauncha Vyuha (Heron Formation)	Pandavas	5	Long, thin column with flexible "neck."	Quick strikes and withdrawals (hit-and-run).		Special forces raid tactics (e.g., Operation Neptune Spear).
7	Mandala Vyuha (Circular Formation)	Kauravas	9	Outer ring of chariots, inner ring of elephants.	Protect archers and commanders (e.g., Karna).	Vulnerable to aerial attacks	
8	Shakata Vyuha (Cart Formation)	Duryodhana	14	Rectangular "box" with layered defenses.	Shield key assets (e.g., Jayadratha).		
9	Vajra Vyuha (Thunderbolt Formation)	Arjuna	14	A dense, wedge-shaped assault formation with the strongest warriors	Decapitation strikes to eliminate enemy leadership.		Special forces "hammer" assaults (e.g., Operation Neptune Spear).
10	Suchi Vyuha (Needle Formation)	Kauravas	12	A long, narrow, penetrating column resembling a needle.	To pierce deep into enemy lines and disrupt their formation.	Vulnerable to flanking attacks if the tip was blunted.	Blitzkrieg spearhead tactics (Germany in WWII).

Source: Vyuhas: Ancient Indian military formations. (2020). Scribd. https://www.scribd.com/document/469669868/Vyuhas