

EXPLAINERS

What is Mosaic Warfare?

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Modern militaries can no longer rely solely on a small number of expensive, high-value platforms to dominate increasingly contested battlespaces. Mosaic Warfare offers an alternative by linking dispersed sensors, autonomous systems, shooters, and decision-makers into adaptive kill webs that can rapidly reconfigure across domains. This explainer examines how the concept works, its operational limitations, and what it could mean for India's military transformation.

1. Introduction

The evolving nature of warfare consistently mirrors advancements in technology, geopolitical competition and changing military doctrines. From gunpowder and mechanised warfare to nuclear weapons and precision-guided munitions, each innovation has transformed fundamentals of war. In the 21st century, swift progress in artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, space assets, quantum technologies, and advanced communications is transforming military operations. This transformation expands the battlespace across various domains while diminishing the survivability of conventional high-value platforms.

For much of the post-Cold War era, military superiority relied on sophisticated platforms such as aircraft carriers, stealth aircraft and advanced armoured formations, known as platform-centric approach. Its effectiveness was witnessed in the Gulf War and subsequent U.S. campaigns. However, the emergence of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities—including long-range precision missiles, cyber operations, electronic warfare and advanced ISR— has increasingly rendered these concentrated assets vulnerable due to the swift development of effective countermeasures.

In response, defence planners are shifting towards adaptable, resilient and distributed force designs. A key concept is DARPA's Mosaic Warfare. Borrowing its name from the artistic technique of arranging numerous individual pieces into a unified image which envisions military power as an interconnected network of specialised systems rather than independent platforms. This approach is supported by AI, machine learning and advanced command-and-control, allows for dynamic integration across various domains. This shift from platform superiority to network superiority is redefining military operations and shaping the future of warfare in an era of multidomain strategic competition.

2. Definition and Scope

Mosaic Warfare is a US warfighting concept introduced by DARPA in 2018. The foundational concept was developed and term was coined Tom Burns and Dan Patt. It was subsequently operationalised and presented by Timothy Grayson, director of DARPA's Strategic Technology Office. The concept derives its name from the art of mosaic construction 'Like the ceramic tiles in mosaics, these individual warfighting platforms are put together to make a larger picture, or in this case, a force package'.^[1]

Patt describes Mosaic Warfare is "about an effective warfighting whole made up of many diverse and fluid pieces. ... How can you get all these little pieces all aligned toward a common objective without perfect communications and without planning everything in advance? It's really hard. And that's the idea of Mosaic Warfare."^[2]

RAND interprets Mosaic Warfare as a warfighting construct that breaks down monolithic, multi-capability military platforms into smaller, specialized, and often low-cost "tiles."^[3]

Mosaic Warfare is a warfighting theory which suggests that making an enemy fight an unexpectedly large, asymmetric volume and variety of weaponry and platforms from different classes, sizes, and types each fighting in a way as distinct as the tiles in a mosaic.^[4] This approach is more powerful and advantageous compared to conventional confrontation of weapons and platforms.^[5]

The scope of the Mosaic warfare includes multi-domain integration through "Kill Webs" covering land, sea, air, space and cyber operations. The effectiveness of the approach varies tremendously depending on the details of any given system and situation.^[6]

Its key principles include Modularity, Decentralization, Interoperability, Resilience and Adaptability.^[7] Mosaic Warfare is not just a technological programme focused solely on AI or drones but it is a comprehensive operational philosophy integrating force design, command-and-control, logistics, cyber capabilities, resilient communications and multi-domain operations. It provides more resilience by focusing on the system's integration and interconnectivity instead of relying on platform dominance.

3. Evolution of Mosaic Warfare

The genesis of Mosaic Warfare is rooted in the development of military thinking about technology, military organization, and military effectiveness over time. From ancient formations to mechanised armies, military doctrines have continuously adapted to technological change. The development of precision-guided munitions, digital communications and information networks during the late 20th century provided the basis for distributed warfare.

Following the end of Cold War the nature of armed conflict underwent a profound transformation with the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) integrated precision strikes, stealth technologies, satellite navigation and advanced command-and-control systems.^[8] The 1991 Gulf War demonstrated the potential of network-enabled warfare, reinforcing confidence in platform-centric operations supported by real-time intelligence and precision weapons achieved overwhelming battlefield dominance.^[9]

These experiences gave rise to Network-Centric Warfare (NCW) in 1998 by Admiral Arthur K. Cebrowski and John Gartska, an “information superiority-enabled concept of operations that generates increased combat power by networking sensors, decision-makers, and shooters”.^[10] Prolonged campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan exposed significant limitations. Information superiority did not automatically translate into strategic success while centralized command structures often struggled to respond rapidly to decentralized threats.

However, the assumptions underpinning NCW gradually weakened as technological diffusion enabled adversaries to develop sophisticated anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities. China and Russia invested in long-range precision missiles, integrated air defences, cyber and electronic warfare, anti-satellite weapons and advanced ISR systems designed to disrupt command networks and neutralise high-value platforms.^[11] Simultaneously, the rising cost and vulnerability of aircraft carriers, strategic bombers and advanced fighters highlighted the need for more resilient and adaptable force structures.

Against this backdrop, the United States Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) introduced Mosaic Warfare in 2017. Rather than relying on a few multifunctional platforms, the concept proposed distributing combat capabilities across numerous specialised systems integrated through common digital architectures, open software standards, and AI-enabled battle management systems.^[12] This marked a significant shift towards interoperability and dynamic force composition.

4. Theoretical Foundations

Although enabled by artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous systems and resilient communications, Mosaic Warfare lies upon a broader intellectual foundation developed through decades of military theory and operational experience. The concept uses several schools of strategic thought while adapting them to the realities of 21st century conflict. As Vanja Rokvić argues, it represents an evolutionary operational framework that integrates classical military theory with contemporary concepts such as Network-Centric Warfare (NCW), Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) and Decision-Centric Warfare (DCW).^[13]

The concept is based on Sun Tzu's emphasis on deception, flexibility and creating strategic dilemmas. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu argued that victory lies in shaping the enemy's perceptions and forcing difficult choices rather than relying solely on attrition.^[14] Mosaic Warfare implements this concept through the use of distributed systems of manned and unmanned systems that offer multiple, unpredictable threats, making it difficult for an adversary to prepare adequately for the attack.^[15]

The influence of Carl von Clausewitz is equally significant. His ideas on friction and the fog of war are still applicable in today's world of cyber, electronic warfare and contested communications. Rather than eliminating uncertainty, Mosaic Warfare seeks to mitigate it through distributed command-and-control, redundant networks and adaptive force structures capable of functioning despite degraded operational environments. Clausewitz describes war as a chameleon, constantly changing its form in response to political, social and technological contexts.^[16] This metaphor aligns with the philosophy of Mosaic Warfare—it adapts, recombines and unfolds through multi-domain, algorithmically driven decision-making.

A more direct conceptual foundation is John Boyd's OODA (Observe–Orient–Decide–Act) Loop, which argues military success depends upon completing the decision cycle faster than an adversary, thereby creating confusion and operational paralysis. Mosaic Warfare leverages AI-enabled analytics, distributed sensors and resilient communications to accelerate friendly decision-making while disrupting the opponent's cognitive processes through dynamic and unpredictable force configurations.^[17]

Finally, the concept echoes broader ideas derived from systems theory. Particularly the notion that complex systems generate capabilities through the interaction of multiple components rather than the performance of any individual element.^[18] In Mosaic Warfare, combat effectiveness arises from the collective functioning of interconnected sensors, communication networks, autonomous platforms and human decision-makers. The operational value of the force therefore depends less upon the sophistication of individual platforms than upon the resilience, adaptability and interoperability of the entire network.

These theoretical concepts collectively highlight the fact that Mosaic Warfare is not merely a technological innovation. But a culmination of evolving military thought concerning information superiority, distributed operations, adaptive command structures and networked force employment.

5. How Mosaic Warfare Works

Operationally Mosaic Warfare seeks to replace conventional military formations with highly adaptive combat networks capable of being assembled, modified and reconfigured as per mission requirements. Instead of deploying large formations centred on a few multifunctional monoliths, commanders employ numerous specialised assets that collaborate through resilient communication networks and artificial intelligence-enabled battle management systems. Like the ceramic tiles in mosaics, several weapon systems are put together to make a larger picture.^[19]

At simplest process looks like: Sense ? Analyse ? Decide ? Allocate ? Strike ? Reconfigure

The process begins with the integration of a diverse array of sensors and shooters distributed across multiple domains. Satellites, airborne early-warning aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, underwater sensors, ground surveillance systems, cyber intelligence platforms and electronic warfare assets constantly gather data regarding enemy movements and battlefield conditions. Instead of operating independently, these systems contribute data to a common operational picture generated through cloud-based computing and AI algorithms.

Artificial intelligence plays a central role by analysing information at speeds than humans due to their slower pace of analytics capability, kill cycles and OODA loops. Machine learning systems identify patterns, prioritise threats, recommend targets and allocate available resources according to operational priorities. AI transforms vast data streams into actionable intelligence, allowing military leaders to make informed decisions more rapidly.^[20]

After the set-up of the operational objectives, the system dynamically builds mission specific combinations of platforms. It could be a reconnaissance drone that spies on an enemy target, a satellite that confirms its location, an electronic warfare system that jams and neutralizes the enemy's radar, and a naval vessel, artillery battery or aircraft that performs the strike. Importantly, these assets don't necessarily have to be used by the same service or located in the same geographical area. Their effectiveness is based on a seamless integration, not necessarily on the proximity.^[21]

Unlike traditional linear kill chains, Mosaic Warfare employs kill webs in which multiple sensors, communication nodes and weapon systems are interconnected through various links.^[22] Multiple redundant sensor systems are employed to take over in the event of one sensor being destroyed or communication failure, ensuring continuity of operations. This redundancy creates immense targeting difficulties for an opponent because the loss of any one platform does not give clearcut operational advantages.^[23]

Equally important is the concept of human-machine teaming. While autonomous systems perform repetitive tasks, dangerous tasks, data-intensive tasks, like surveillance, logistics, etc., electronic warfare, target recognition, etc. but human commanders are responsible for strategic judgment, ethical decision-making, and lawful application of force. The role of the human in the entire gamut is 'on-the-loop' that is more of higher command functions like setting the objectives, situation monitoring and managing the logistical challenges rather than micro-managing the action in the battle arena.[\[24\]](#)

This distributed architecture ultimately provides the defining advantage of Mosaic Warfare: resilience. Operating over a number of interconnected assets with capabilities spread across them, instead of having a few high-return platforms, makes a military force a lot harder to disrupt. The network remains resilient when individual systems fail, reconfigured and continues to operate, maintaining the ability to conduct combat operations in contested operational environments.

6. Examples of Application of Mosaic Warfare

Although Mosaic Warfare remains an evolving concept rather than a fully established doctrine, yet various contemporary military initiatives illustrate its practical application. One of the examples of Mosaic Warfare is Russia-Ukraine War. Ukraine does not specifically use the term but its battlefield adaptation reflects core mosaic principles, including distributed low-cost uncrewed systems, adaptive kill webs, decentralised decision-making and rapid sensor-to-shooter integration.[\[25\]](#)

Drone-centric warfare in Ukraine is best understood as not just a technological shift but as an organisational and operational transformation and evolution aligned with mosaic warfare principles. Ukraine's deployment of low-cost, explosive-laden (maritime) uncrewed surface vehicles (USVs) has significantly diminished the Russian Black Sea Fleet's regional dominance by forcing its major warships to retreat from Sevastopol to more distant ports, without a Navy.[\[26\]](#) By February 2026, systems such as Wild Hornets' high-speed Sting were reported to have destroyed more than 70% of incoming Shahed-136/Geran-2-type one-way attack drones over Kyiv and its surrounding area, thereby reducing reliance on scarce Western surface-to-air missiles and preserving them for higher-end threats.[\[27\]](#)

Iran provides another example of Mosaic Warfare. The recent conflict in West Asia demonstrated as to how distributed, decentralised operations by a smaller power can frustrate a superior conventional power. The integration of low-cost UAVs, UGVs and SSVs for reconnaissance and strikes, along with small boats and mines in the maritime chokepoint of Hormuz, threatened even the most advanced American Naval forces. This situation highlighted the limitations of U.S. forces, which relied heavily on their monolithic hi-tech platforms and structures but struggled to maintain control over a 33-kilometer-wide strait. Iran's adaptations stem from the fall of Saddam Hussein regime in 2003 and Israel's decapitation campaigns in the Middle East. It implemented a decentralised command structure that could withstand leadership collapse, communication failures and psychological shocks, especially C2 structure of IRGC was designed to absorb attrition and leadership losses while ensuring regime continuity. Iran effectively utilized cyber operations and psychological warfare to disrupt communications, demoralise adversaries, and complicate the battlefield.[\[28\]](#) By disseminating information about alleged losses of U.S. high-value assets like MQ-4C Triton drone, an F-35 jet and damages to USS Gerald Ford aircraft carrier and civilian casualties at an elementary school in Minab[\[29\]](#) undermined American credibility, fostered international sympathy for Iran and increased the political costs of further U.S. and Israeli military action.

These developments together show that Mosaic Warfare is not just a topic for theoretical discussion anymore. The concept is still changing, but its main ideas are being seen more and more in military drills, procurement priorities and changes to doctrine made by important military nations that are getting ready for future intense conflicts.

7. Limitations

Every coin has two faces. Similarly, Mosaic Warfare has its own set of limitations. Its primary drawbacks include extreme technological complexity, vulnerabilities in command and control (C2) and massive logistical burdens.

To swiftly link thousands of fragmented "tiles" (e.g., UAVs, autonomous sensors and ground robots), armies will have to use highly advanced AI and Machine to Machine interfaces. Interacting in the ever-changing "Kill Web" will require perfection of communication and interoperability among the participants. In case something fails in communication nodes or the software synchronizes incorrectly, the units would not be able to interact on their own. The disruption of its functioning through Cyberattacks can result in disastrous consequences during wars. For Import dependent nations, Integration of imported weapon with no access to critical technology marks a major hurdle.

While individual tiles are cheap, maintaining and supplying massive quantities of specialized platforms is exceptionally challenging. The sheer volume of spare parts, different power requirements and particular ammunition needed for different localized "mosaics" can enormously strain military supply chains. Affordable and accessible sensors and weapons systems also pose challenge for nations.

Transforming the traditional legacy military organizations, which depend much on the rigid hierarchical structure into mosaics presents the total change in doctrines, particularly for impoverished and developing countries. Overcoming institutional resistance and integrating distributed forces seamlessly across disparate branches (air, land, sea, space, and cyber) is a massive procedural hurdle.^[30]

8. Implications for India

For India, Mosaic Warfare has significant implications for military modernisation and joint force integration and Defence Planning. It enables more faster and resilient responses to conventional, grey-zone, cyber and maritime threats. Simultaneously managing challenges and disputes from China, Pakistan and expanding responsibilities within the Indian Ocean Region.

For the Indian Armed Forces, this model provides an exit from the unsustainable fiscal burden of high-value assets, offering instead a cheaper self-healing Kill Web architecture that prioritises decision superiority over traditional attrition. Mosaic warfare enhances India's strategic flexibility by enabling rapid, adaptive responses across conventional, cyber and grey-zone threats.^[31] Mosaic warfare aligns with India's overarching goal of achieving strategic autonomy through Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative and reducing reliance on foreign defence technologies. Through the efforts of DRDO and the development of indigenous systems (Rustam, Ghatak, MALE etc.). India can achieve greater self-reliance in defence and strengthen its position as a regional military power.

Drawing lessons from Iran's asymmetric success, India can strengthen maritime deterrence by investing in UUVs, missile-armed fast attack craft, for swarm boat attacks, difficult to be target by Anti-ship Ballistics. A Mosaic of mines, micro-UUVs and land-based standoff missiles would offer a cost-effective alternative to reliance on large aircraft carriers. Creating more potent blockade and operational dilemmas for Pakistan/Chinese maritime trade transiting through the region cost effectively. Similarly, replacing the Indian Army's predominantly monolithic formations with modular, scalable forces could improve flexibility and reduce escalation risks in limited high-intensity conflicts such as Operation Sindoor.^[32] Loss of monoliths in war lowers the morale of the nation and acts as achievement and tool of Cognitive warfare for weaker adversary.

Furthermore, the proposed integrated theatre commands provide an opportunity to adapt the principles of Mosaic Warfare. By enabling interoperable communications, shared situational awareness and decentralized decision-making

across the Army, Navy and Air Force, can strengthen jointness and improve responsiveness in both conventional and hybrid conflicts.

Nevertheless, implementing such a framework will require significant investments in digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, military education and organisational reforms. For India, Mosaic Warfare should be viewed not as a model for direct adoption but as a strategic framework to guide long-term defence transformation through corresponding changes in doctrine, training, procurement and command culture.

9. Conclusion

Mosaic Warfare represents more than a technological innovation introduced by DARPA in 2017. It presents a fundamental shift in warfighting from platform-centric and linear kill-chain to distributed kill-web approach using weapon integration. However, shifting away from monoliths is not likely to happen in totality in future even for major powers. Instead, gradual changeover will be seen, with the pace depending on a number of factors like the nature of the threat, rate of advancement of technology, access to technology, etc. Future wars will utilize mix of manned and unmanned systems. As the military axiom exists, Man behind the machine is more important, Mosaic Warfare will shift the 'man-in-the-loop' to 'man-on-the-loop' but Human intelligence would remain key pillar in mosaic warfare.

For India, the concept offers valuable insights into addressing emerging security challenges across the Himalayan frontier, the Indian Ocean Region and the Indo-Pacific. Ultimately, as battlefield transparency continues to render traditional massed formations obsolete, the shift towards a decentralised, rapidly composable force remains the most viable path for India to turn complexity into an asymmetric advantage

In an era of ICT and IoT where information, adaptability and resilience are becoming as decisive as firepower itself, Mosaic Warfare marks a significant evolution in the theory and practice of military operations. Instead of focusing on the concentration of power in relatively few platforms, this doctrine is all about creating a mosaic of capabilities.

Footnotes:

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