

A NEW SECURITY PROBLEM: THE ASYMMETRICAL WARFARE

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ABSTRACT

“Welcome to the world of asymmetrical warfare, a place high on the anxiety list of military planners. In the asymmetrical realm, military experts say, a small band of commandos might devastate the United States and leave no clue about who ordered the attack.”

[*New York Times*, Feb. 2001]

After the end of the Cold War a lot of military and security experts thought that conflicts will involve conventional warfare against an opponent of comparable might, using similar weapons on a known battlefield.

However, there were also experts, they have been pointing out for years that resistance forces or attacking groups (in places like Chechnya, or on 11.9.2001) have been conducting a very different kind of war. In it, a relatively small and lightly equipped force attacks points of weakness in an otherwise stronger opponent by unorthodox means. In this “new type” of warfare this forces fight on their own terms, not those of the enemy—petrol bombs against tanks, airplanes against skyscrapers for example.

For this new fighting methodology had been given the name of asymmetrical warfare, a term that appears to date from the early 1990s.

I try to explain

- the real or possible origin of asymmetrical warfare (from the ancient Greek wars)
- the possible goals
- the wide instruments
- effects on security (political) thinking, on society, on military, etc.
- answers given to this new security problem

The attacks on the US on 11 September are a textbook example and the term has had wide coverage since. Some writers extend the idea to any military situation in which a technically weaker opponent is able to gain an advantage through relatively simple means. An obvious example is the landmine—cheap and easy to distribute, but difficult to counter. Another example sometimes given is anti-satellite attacks, in which it is much easier and cheaper to knock out space-based weapons than to put them in place to start with.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Probably the earliest recorded example of asymmetric warfare is contained in the Bible as *the fight between David and Goliath*. As inspiration, the story is usually cited as a triumph of the weak over the strong, or the oppressed over the mighty, but in simple military terms, it was the triumph of planning and skill over brute force. In modern terms, it could be thought of as the use of ranged weapons and high maneuverability over contact weapons and armor (stone launched from sling vs thrusting spear).

In the ancient Greek history is there an example known as *the political and economical fight between Athens and Melos* (little island). The Athens pressured as politically as well militarily the Melosians to accept a treaty within the so called "Alliance of Delos". The island didn't want to lose its independence, but the pressure was so hard, that finally they accepted this kind of unfair cooperation. Despite the power of Athens Melos has had a very big impact on the whole system, because on this island was stationed and saved the money of this alliance. So, finally they could influence the decision making of the Athens.

Hannibal Barca (247 BC-182 BC) was a military commander of ancient Carthage, best known for his achievements in the Second Punic War in marching an army from Spain over the Pyrenees and the Alps into northern Italy and defeating the Romans at The Battles of the Trebia (218 BC), Lake Trasimene (217 BC) and Cannae (216 BC). After Cannae, the Romans refused to fight him in pitched battles, and gradually captured all strongholds he had gained in Southern Italy. An invasion of Africa by the Romans under Scipio Africanus in 204 BC forced Hannibal to return to Africa, where defeated him at Zama (202 BC).

DEFINITIONS

The American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) defines asymmetrical warfare as "The use of innovative strategies, tactics, and technologies by a 'weaker' state or sub-state adversary that are intended to avoid the strengths and exploit the potential vulnerabilities of larger and technologically superior opponents. This includes:

- [1] The selective use of weapons or military resources by a state or sub-state group to counter, deter, or possibly defeat a numerically or technologically superior force.
- [2] The use of diplomatic and other non-military resources or tactics by a state or sub-state group to discourage or constrain military operations by a superior force."

For example within the Canadian military, the asymmetrical threat is defined as "a term used to describe attempts to circumvent or undermine an opponent's strengths while exploiting his weakness, using methods that differ significantly from the opponent's usual mode of operations."¹

Paul Mann in his publication "Asymmetrical Threats New Military Watchword" explains that "Asymmetric threat" is a new term used to describe the weapons and

¹ As we can see the CIA definition covers a wide spectrum of conflicts it is too broad.

tactics that relatively weak enemies could use to foil or circumvent the technological supremacy of western nations.

Their aim is not to claim territory or to even threaten the sovereignty of their opponents. Their primary objective is to weaken their western adversary's resolve and ability to use their superior conventional military capability effectively to intervene in regional conflicts or to thwart the goals of rogue states or other subversive groups.

TACTICS, INSTRUMENTS

The tactical success of asymmetric warfare is dependent on at least one of two assumptions:

- [1] If the inferior power is in a position of self-defense; i.e., under attack or occupation, it *may* be possible to use unconventional tactics, such as hit-and-run and selective battles where the superior power is weaker, as an effective means of harassment without violating the Laws of war. Example: Vietnam war, American Revolutionary War.
- [2] If the inferior power is in an aggressive position, however, and/or turns to tactics prohibited by the laws of war. Example: II. World War, War in Chechnya.

Asymmetric threats embrace the full spectrum of disproportionate intimidation with which the West might be faced, from international civil disobedience and criminality right up to military low intensity conflicts. They range from computer warfare through to terrorism or rogue state nuclear blackmail, and includes the use of weapons of mass destruction as much as national destabilisation arising from mass migration.

Urban warfare in asymmetric warfare

Unlike the conventional wars - where one army fights another army in wide open battlefields - the asymmetric warfare tends to take place inside densely populated urban terrain. Therefore, urban warfare is a prominent part of the asymmetric warfare. Usually, the weaker party is persuading the war to take place inside of its own cities for several reasons:

- [1] A populated city is much harder to conquer than an open field.
- [2] The urbanized city is much easier to defend because it is full with tall buildings, narrow alleys and sewage tunnels. The building can provide excellent sniping posts while the alleys are ideal for planting booby traps.
- [3] If the attacking force is a Western army, adhering to international law and western moral values, it must restrain from using heavy fire power and indiscriminate bombing. Thus, the party barricading in a city won't have to face warplanes, heavy artillery and massive tank assault.
- [4] "Media War": a war on urban terrain is bound to cause some civilian casualties and extreme damage to civilian property. Photos of dead civilians and ruined street broadcast on TV make a strong impact in favor of the party barricading in the city and undermine the morale of the attacking force.

[5] Often, the barricading party is using the immunity that civilians gain under international law in order to prevent attacks on its combatants. It mainly does it by using "Human Shield" - a tactic which is declared a war crime. The use of the weaker party in Human Shield is mostly ignored by the world media and different human right organizations.

COUNTERING THE ASSYMETRICAL THREAT

The asymmetrical threat will have an effect on warfare at all three levels (strategic, operational, and tactical) but it will be most dramatic at the operational level. The strategic level leaders must continue to be concerned with the entire spectrum of national and international security issues, regardless of the source, and must operate within the political arena to seek solutions and to develop strategies to address the problems. They will also design the policies and guidance which will set the framework by which operational level commanders and their civilian counter-parts in other government and non-government agencies will operate to address the perceived threats. While the tactical level commanders must acquire new skills and learn to employ their forces in different operational arenas, their leadership role will not change appreciably. However, as the world enters the 21st century, the challenge for operational level leaders will change drastically. It will be the operational level commanders who will have the responsibility for the defence of the country and their military forces involved in operations in other parts of the world who will be especially susceptible to terrorist attacks. In addition, it will be the responsibility of the operational level leaders to co-ordinate defence activities with the many other agencies which could become involved whether they are police forces, intelligence agencies, or emergency response organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

In 21st century, US and its western allies will face new types of adversaries who will fight electronically and psychologically, not necessarily physically. They will shun the traditional battlefield, seize no territory, and seek no victories in the conventional sense. Their primary strategies will be to exploit the "asymmetries" or supposed weaknesses inherent in the West's technological superiority.

The meaning of "asymmetrical threat", words like disproportionate, unbalanced, unequal and irregular all come to mind as possible descriptors. But as Anthony Stone, a retired British General Officer and current defence adviser with the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, points out; it is really referring to the huge differences which exist today between the conventional forces of western nations and what an opposing force might consist of, especially with respect to the quality of the technology. Likewise, the quantitative asymmetry is no less significant between opposing forces. On one hand, third-world guerrillas who have little access to technology of any description often outflank high-tech armies as illustrated during the Vietnam War. On the other hand, the latest technology in the hands of comparatively few and relatively unsophisticated terrorists can tie down the combined capability of

regular forces equipped with the latest technology, as the Afghan rebels did so effectively to the Soviet Union during the Afghanistan War.

In conclusion, many analysts agree that the western militaries are ill prepared for asymmetrical warfare that now seem to be more of a probability than a possibility. The threat of catastrophic terrorism spans the globe, defying ready classification as solely foreign or domestic. The fundamentalist, the revolutionary, terrorist, and the rouge state all can advance their cause in the face of the apparently overwhelming odds of western governments who continue to deploy organised military forces in the mistaken belief that they are superior and will not be militarily challenged.

To effectively address the counter-revolution in military affair and the increased threat from asymmetrical warfare, militaries must develop strategies and plans for applying armed force to frustrate the violent actions of their foes at the least possible cost in time, resources, and above all blood.

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