

ASYMMETRIC WARFARE: OLD METHOD, NEW CONCERN

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“By indirection find directions out.”
—*Shakespeare, Hamlet*

Strategists define asymmetric warfare as conflict deviating from the norm, or an indirect approach to affect a counter-balancing of force. Such warfare is not new. Combatants throughout the ages have continually sought to negate or avoid the strength of the other, while applying one's own strength against another's weakness. Asymmetric warfare is best understood as a strategy, a tactic, or a method of warfare and conflict. Because no group or state can defeat the U.S. in conventional warfare, America's adversaries and potential adversaries are turning to asymmetric strategies. We must therefore understand asymmetric warfare, and be able to respond in kind.

“When conventional tactics are altered unexpectedly according to the situation, they take on the element of surprise and increase in strategic value.”
—*Sun Bin, The Lost Art of War*

Though there are numerous examples of asymmetry in 20th century warfare, its use was not as pronounced between adversaries as it is today. Wars were primarily fought by nation-states with balanced, conventional fighting capabilities. When asymmetric methods were used, usually in the form of maneuver or technological advantage, they had a dramatic effect.

Three prominent examples of asymmetric actions that counterbalanced established force are: the *sturmtrupp* assault tactics that broke the trench-line stalemate and three-dimensional warfare as a result of the airplane during World War I; the panzer *blitzkrieg* through France in World War II; and the *Strategic Defense Initiative* that helped end the nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The kind of asymmetric strategy and tactics seen in the Vietnam War were termed guerilla warfare. These asymmetric actions, however, did not produce the dramatic, day-to-day effects on operations that we have seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

At the present time the U.S. has no identified conventional, war-making peer, as we had prior to Desert Storm. This absence of global peer competitors makes the world more uncertain, unstable, and difficult to anticipate. As the sole superpower, with the accompanying expectations placed on the U.S. and our extensive presence around the world, the U.S. has become a big and inviting target. The U.S. engages in humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, and enforcement of UN or NATO sanctions, and maintains bases necessary for force projection worldwide. Our adversaries confront and confuse us with a multitude of asymmetric actions that catch us by surprise, to which we continue to respond with a *Cold War* mentality.

Since Desert Storm, our adversaries have learned not to come at us in a symmetric way since it is impossible for any country to engage the U.S. in an arms race. By using asymmetric actions, our adversaries exploit our vulnerabilities; taking advantage of the *global information environment*, they are also able to do so on the cheap.

Reality of the Operational Environment

“Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times.”
—Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Today we see an ambiguous world, with people, groups, and governments pursuing complex goals. The borders have blurred between governments and people, military and populace, public and private. New *fourth-generation warriors*¹, non-national and trans-national groups based on ideology, religion, tribe, culture, zealotry, and illegal economic activities, have pushed many regions of the world into anarchy.

Russia is in disarray, with increased fighting within its Muslim states in the oil-rich Caspian Sea region. The Balkans, though somewhat stabilized, have enormous corruption problems with no real peace in sight. The counter-drug war in Colombia and Mexico has intensified. Israel, the Middle East, North Korea, and Taiwan remain powder kegs.

This dangerous environment, coupled with the increased use of our military as an extension of U.S. diplomacy, has placed us in a situation where our adversaries employ asymmetric tactics to negate superior conventional strength. We Americans look at conflict through a winner’s eyes—usually from a past war. Setbacks cause concern, and if our quick-fix for the conflict at hand derails, due to unintended consequences, we usually overreact and are unable to deal with reality. Our standard approach to adversary actions means that we have trouble adapting to what we actually find on the ground. Planned intervention on the cheap, with awkward constraints, is inflexible and pompous. Past high-tech, standoff warfare is largely ineffective against these fourth-generation adversaries. We continue trying to play American football on a European soccer field.

Captain Larry Seaquist notes, “While the U.S. military pushed toward high-tech, low-casualty combat, war went the opposite direction—toward brutal neighbor-on-neighbor killing, carried out by ragtag collections of citizen-warriors, some of them just children.”²

These low-intensity conflicts have no quick-fix solutions. They have complex cultural, religious, and historical origins where criminality, population coercion, and extremist politics abound. Asymmetric tactics, usually conducted out of necessity by our adversaries, are an economy of force and a weapon of choice.

As Liddell Hart explained, “Campaigns of this kind are more likely to continue because it is the only kind of war that fits the conditions of the modern age, while being at the same time suited to take advantage of social discontent, racial ferment, and nationalist fervors.”³

Our diplomats, commercial investors, and military will continue to experience the unpredictability, chaos, and asymmetric threats that are becoming the norm around the world. The greatest threat to

world stability appears to be small, regional wars with which the U.S. will be forced to contend.⁴ Are we ready for this type of threat?

The Threat

“It is every Muslim’s duty to wage war against U.S. and Israeli citizens anywhere in the world.”
—Osama bin Laden⁵

Americans separate war and peace; most of our enemies today do not. Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, the “Army of Mohammed” in Yemen, and narco-guerrillas in Colombia are but a few groups that threaten America, our allies, and regional stability. The extensive, twisted links between terrorism, black marketers, drug lords, arms dealers, and zealots have created a formidable enemy.

Most of our adversaries are non-nation-state actors (terrorists, international and trans-national criminal organizations, or insurgents). They have a completely different mindset, believing they are continuously at war. Violence is a way of life. They know violence is an excellent tool against a democratic people worried about any threat to its way of life. Taking advantage of the information age, our adversaries are able to show atrocities, abuse, and destruction on our television screen daily. The values of enemies are different from ours, making it very difficult for us to understand why they don’t behave the way we believe they should.

Operating in agrarian cultures, with a small toolbox of dangerous, high-tech capabilities, they maintain power with machete-wielding intimidation. Most are predators that take advantage of weak states for refuge, and the discontent of the local populace for support. If they cannot inspire support from the people, they coerce recalcitrant members. Once established, they operate in and out of these areas with impunity.

“Greater powers and resources do not guarantee tactical superiority.”
—Sun Bin, *The Lost Art of War*

These fourth-generation enemies have become very adept at using the asymmetric tactics of information warfare. They manipulate print and radio, distort images with perception management and background film clips (or “B Roll”) on global television, and disrupt the Internet. The *infosphere* has become a new battleground suited for asymmetric attack from across the globe. Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic was an expert at using the media as a weapon. Through deception, disinformation, and the “CNN factor,” he excelled at this cerebral form of competition.

Saddam Hussein has convinced most of the Iraqi population, many of our Western allies, and the Arab world that the UN-U.S. sanctions are directed against the people, not his tyranny. For 10 years, through the use of asymmetric actions, he has tied up countless ships, troops, and aircraft without reinstating sanctioned compliance inspections.

The Chinese have taken serious steps in their warfighting strategy for future conflict. Not only have

they steadily enhanced their conventional arsenal with high-tech innovation, but they have learned the pronounced effect asymmetric actions have had on the U.S. and its allies over the last 10 years. Two modern-day strategists, Senior Colonel Qiuo Liang and Senior Colonel Wang Xiangsui, have laid out in detail how to conduct full-spectrum warfare against the U.S., using asymmetric strategy, in their book *Unrestricted Warfare*.⁶ This warfare strategy doesn't follow any rules, counters the U.S.'s high-tech advantages, and optimizes the electro-magnetic spectrum. All dimensions of space are considered the battleground.

Adversary Actions

*“Water shapes its course according to the ground over which it flows;
the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is fighting.”*

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Recent examples of asymmetric actions abound around the world. Riots planned by faction leaders, made up of coerced non-combatants, and manipulated by gangster police, were effective against NATO troops keeping the peace in Bosnia. Milosevic was able to move special police troops and other thugs at will throughout Kosovo, destroying life and infrastructure, while NATO's unmatched air power was incapable of stopping him.

A group of Palestinians redirected British funds earmarked for education programs to further ideals of tolerance, mutual respect, and peace, instead using the money to send children to guerrilla training schools and then put them on the streets of Israel to fight. This was a successful deception of the British government's generosity.⁷

One of the insurgent forces in Colombia, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), has nationally threatened every Colombian millionaire and corporate CEO unless a tax is paid for protection. This action has produced immense pressure from the upper class on government authorities in Colombia. The FARC has also leveraged the Colombian government into conceding a portion of the country to their control, separated by a recognized and accepted demilitarized zone. Colombia now has more displaced citizens (one million) than Kosovo experienced during their war.

Chechen rebels in Russia have demonstrated time after time the effectiveness of asymmetric action against conventional forces by capitalizing on local support, information warfare, terror, cutting critical supply lines, and using urban areas to render irrelevant the superiority of the Russian armored forces.

Our national expectation of a casualty-free, high-tech conflict is challenged, for example, by rogue-state impertinence, setbacks dealt by the warlords of Mogadishu, and terrorist attacks, like those on the USS Cole and our embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. We have been forced to pull back in fear, changing our operational effectiveness around the world.

What Can We Do?

“He will conquer who has learnt the artifice of deviation”

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Our response to asymmetric actions has usually been to react with defensive, hunkering-down, panic decisions; or in some cases to retaliate ineffectively with air or cruise missile attacks, occasionally injuring non-combatants or disgracing ourselves in the media. We continue to restrict ourselves to unrealistic rules of engagement, regardless of the situation. Deception, psychological operations, cyberwar, disinformation, “softwar,”⁸ are all non-kinetic ingredients in the toolbox of fourth-generation warriors, that should, in turn, be used against them.

We must understand that relative strength is situational; it is based on time, speed, location, and conditions. These intangibles are harder to define and offer strength in different circumstances. The side that is weaker in resources or complex command and control systems can balance that with superior cleverness, morale, offensive attitude, security, surprise, flexibility, and organizational design that fit the task at hand. We must preempt enemy asymmetric actions by attacking the cohesion and flow of their operational cycle.

An adversary must plan, gain support, move, stage, attack, and regroup during any operation or in pursuit of a cause (Figure 1). We can cause him to fail anywhere along this process-optimally, prior to his attack phase. It’s all a matter of gaining positional advantage, mentally or physically, over an opponent. Our adversaries have been very adept at gaining positional advantage with asymmetrical action against our moral and organizational domain (Figure 2). We can reverse this advantage by doing the same.

Asymmetrical targeting (deny, destroy, disrupt, dislocate, degrade) of adversary moral and organizational domains, instead of our typical, predictable, standard, conventional approach against physical strength provides a faster, effective defeat. Indirectly preventing our enemy from gaining ascendancy over the local population, denying organizations the use of safe areas, disrupting cash-flow and other supplies, negating effective use of the media, exposing corruption, disgracing the leadership, breaking power relationships, will put adversaries on the defensive and force them off balance.

This requires initiative, momentum, out-of-the-box thinking, flexibility, and a winning mindset. Crimes against humanity, small wars, and probable mega-terrorist (biological, chemical, nuclear, information) disasters are threats worthy of our attention. We must turn the tide on these fourth-generation warriors using asymmetric actions with a preemptive strategy. It’s a matter of being the hunter or the prey.

Notes

1. Lind, William S., Maj. John F. Schmitt, and Col. Gary I. Wilson. “Fourth-Generation Warfare: Another Look,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1994.
2. Seaquist, Larry. “Community War,” *Naval Institute Proceedings*, August 2000.
3. Hart, Liddell. *Low-Intensity Operations*, 1971, p. 16.
4. Grau, Lester and Jacob Kipp. “Small Wars,” *NSF Review*, Summer 2000.
5. Vince Crawley “Terror Alert,” *Army Times*, Nov. 6, 2000.
6. Liang, Qiuo and Wang Xiangsui. *Unrestricted Warfare*, 1996
7. “Why are we paying for children to learn how to kill?” *News of the World*, November 5, 2000.
8. *Softwar* is a term developed by information operations strategist Chuck DeLaco to describe the

hostile use of global visual media to shape another's will.

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<http://www.nationalstrategy.com/nsr/v10n2Winter00/100202.htm>