

Asymmetric Warfare – An Insight into Another Dimension of Warfare

Lieutenant Colonel Subhojit Bhattacharya

Introduction

Asymmetric Warfare (AW) was originally referred to as a war between two or more actors or groups whose relative military power differed significantly. Contemporary military thinkers tended to broaden this to include asymmetry of strategy or tactics. Today AW can be described as a conflict in which the resources of two belligerent powers differ in essence; and in the struggle they interact and attempt to exploit each other's characteristic weaknesses. Such struggles often involve strategies and tactics of unconventional warfare, the "weaker" combatant attempting to use strategy to offset deficiencies in quantity or quality.¹

It is thus incorrect to see AW as a new development, even though AW has only become a preoccupation for both military planners as well as academic commentators in the last few years – more so post 9/11, when it has become a cottage industry of sorts!

Sun-Tzu and Asymmetric Warfare

Sun-Tzu begins 'The Art of War' by elaborating his general principles of warfare. Highest among these is the principle of winning without fighting. Here Sun-Tzu warns commanders against seeking pitched battles. He counsels, "The highest realisation of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities. Thus, one who excels at employing the military subjugates other people's armies without engaging in battle, captures other people's fortified cities without prolonged fighting. He must fight under Heaven with the paramount aim of 'preservation.' Thus his weapons will not become dull, and the gains can be preserved."

Lieutenant Colonel Subhojit Bhattacharya was commissioned on 10 Jun 1989 in the Regiment of Artillery (173 Field Regiment). He has authored a book 'A Soldiers' Diary – A Collection of Reminiscences'. The officer is presently posted as SO1 (Artillery), HQ Eastern Command.

It was not until the beginning of the 20th Century that Sun-Tzu's work played a major role in the conduct of Eastern warfare. Often credited with providing inspiration to modern asymmetric actors, The Art of War actually addresses conflict between States. In many instances, the ascription of concepts and tactics used by guerrillas, terrorists and other Non-State actors to the work Sun-Tzu is erroneous. Asymmetry, for Sun-Tzu, enables conventional military forces to overcome their adversaries with the least loss of life and wealth.

Militaries have always attempted to seek asymmetric advantages so as to inflict maximum damage to the enemy at minimum cost. Asymmetric strategies are especially favoured by the weak because they tend to offset the conventional superiority of their opponents. Sun-Tzu, himself, noted that in general, one engages in battle with the orthodox and "gains victory through the unorthodox".²

However, AW has taken on a new relevance today. Opponents are increasingly willing to employ "the unorthodox" in battle as well. This is because conflicts today tend not to be total wars; they tend to have complex causes and manifest themselves in small wars, low-intensity conflicts (LICs) or sub-national conflicts.

In a situation of more limited political and strategic objectives, the means associated with conventional wars of the past appear inappropriate. Therefore, both states and non-state actors are increasingly employing unconventional means as these will prove less politically costly and more unlikely to provoke a massive conventional response from the adversary and the international community. Such means might include terrorism, economic sanctions, information operations and so on.

Types of Asymmetric Warfare

Asymmetries in Political/Strategic Objectives. Asymmetric strategies are often a result of asymmetries in political and strategic objectives. For example, Milosevic's political objective during the Kosovo war was not to defeat NATO but to prevent NATO from defeating him. As a result, he did not need to launch a conventional military operation against NATO. Instead, the Serbs relied on Information Warfare to frustrate NATO's political objectives and to fragment the Alliance's unity in a bid to minimise the military damage NATO could cause.

Asymmetries in Strategy. AW can also result from one side engaging the opponent in a form, and/or at an intensity, which the enemy is unable or unwilling to resist. The Vietnam War was a good example of both. Asymmetries in form were observed when the North Vietnamese employed Truong Chinh's strategy of "interlocking", i.e., a mixture of both conventional and guerrilla operations, against the American strategy of conventional military operations.

Asymmetric strategies are usually not the norm in Inter-State conflicts. The strength of symmetric strategies such as conventional military operations are proven and understood. This is the reason why conventional armed forces still take up the bulk of defence resources in most countries. Moreover, as long as potential enemies possess conventional military capabilities, there will always be a need to deter and defend against them in a similar way. States will, therefore, never rely exclusively on asymmetric strategies in the conduct of military affairs.

Furthermore, the effects of asymmetric operations are ambiguous. For example, one cannot be certain of how much public support can be eroded through negative information-media operations. In fact, asymmetric operations may sometimes have little strategic consequences. Osama's terror attacks have not weakened the US involvement in the Middle East. They have in fact concentrated the minds of American policy-makers on the need to push through a political settlement in the unstable region so as to erode the underlying causes of terror and religious fanaticism.

Therefore, when used by states, asymmetric strategies are more likely to be deployed alongside conventional capabilities in order to enhance the latter's overall effectiveness and to provide more choices for policy-makers. Some asymmetric challenges, such as Media Warfare, can turn out to be double-edged swords. While images of casualties suffered in acts of terrorism (a form of AW) may erode public support for military action, it may also fuel a desire for retribution and revenge.

Characteristics of Asymmetric Strategies³

Strategies exist along a continuum of symmetry in relation to their opponents. While the term "asymmetric strategy" logically suggests

that it must be understood in relation to another strategy, at a practical level, it is more useful to understand “asymmetric” as synonymous with “unconventional”. In this regard, it is possible to identify some general characteristics of asymmetric strategies.

First, asymmetric strategies seek to exploit key vulnerabilities of the enemy. Such vulnerabilities tend not to be appreciated (e.g. simmering resentment in minorities) or else are unable to be rectified (e.g. the volatility of public opinion in liberal democracies). Indeed, the asymmetric character of such threats contributes to their not being appreciated.

Second, asymmetric strategies are highly suited for strategic competition between States in the absence of all-out war because they may be employed not only during the violent phases of a conflict but during any phase of the conflict.

Third, the actual agents behind asymmetric threats cannot always be identified, especially when future adversaries could be Non-State actors. For example, the planting of a computer virus (such as the ILOVEU virus which plagued computers world-wide in May 2000) could be virtually imperceptible until the damage is done.

Fourth, it is difficult to counter asymmetric threats. Deterrence requires known opponents. Richard Betts made the point that “retaliation requires knowledge of who has launched an attack and the address at which they reside.”⁴ When hostile acts cannot be attributed, deterrence fails. Even if preparations to react against asymmetric attacks could be made, the costs are likely to be prohibitive.

Where AW is carried out (generally covertly) by allegedly Non-State actors who are connected to or sympathetic to a particular nation's interest, it may be deemed war by proxy. This is typically done to give deniability to the State actor. The deniability can be important to keep the State actor from being tainted by the actions, to allow the State actor to negotiate in apparent good faith by claiming they are not responsible for the actions of parties who are merely sympathisers, or to avoid being accused of belligerent actions or war crimes.

Terrorism and Asymmetric Warfare

There are two different viewpoints on the relationship between AW and terrorism. In the modern context, AW is increasingly considered a component of Fourth Generation Warfare. When practiced outside the laws of war, it is often defined as "terrorism". Terrorism is usually resorted to as a tactic by the weaker side in an asymmetric conflict.

The other view is that AW is not synonymous with terrorism, even though it is used as a tactic by the weaker side. It is typical, in an asymmetric conflict, for the stronger side to accuse the weaker side of being bandits, pillagers or terrorists. These accusations are usually part of propaganda campaigns, although they are sometimes true. Some argue that AW is sometimes called "terrorism" by those wishing to deny the political aims of their weaker opponents and to exploit the negative connotations of the word. There are those who hold the view that "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." An example of this is over Kashmir: the Pakistanis claim that a war of freedom for the Kashmiris is being fought with the Indians, who in turn, label them as terrorists. The sectarian killings upon Iraqi civilians by insurgents are similarly labelled as terrorism by some and resistance by others.

One example of AW involving terrorism is the use of terrorism by the much lesser Mongol forces in the creation and control of the Mongol empire. The other is the use of terrorism by the superior Nazi forces in the Balkans, in their attempt to suppress the resistance movement.

Success of Asymmetric Warfare⁵

The tactical success of AW is dependent on at least some of the following assumptions:

- (a) One side can have a technological advantage which outweighs the numerical advantage of the enemy; the decisive English Longbow at the Battle of Agincourt is an example. The advantage may be the other way around. For example, the vast numerical superiority of the Chinese forces during their initial involvement in the Korean War overwhelmed the technological superiority of the United Nations forces.

(b) Training and tactics as well as technology can prove decisive and allow a smaller force to overcome a much larger one. For example, for several centuries the Greek hoplite's (heavy infantry) use of phalanx made them far superior to their enemies. The Battle of Thermopylae, which also involved good use of terrain, is a well known example.

(c) If the inferior power is in a position of self-defence; i.e., under attack or occupation, it may be possible to use unconventional tactics, such as hit-and-run and selective battles in which the superior power is weaker, as an effective means of harassment without violating the laws of war. This tactic can sometimes be used to play on the inward political situations of a nation and its citizens' patience with the war, perhaps provoking demonstrations.

(d) If the inferior power is in an aggressive position, however, and/or turns to tactics prohibited by the laws of war (*jus in bello*), its success depends on the superior power's refraining from like tactics. For example, the law of land warfare prohibits the use of a flag of truce or clearly-marked medical vehicles as cover for an attack or ambush, but an asymmetric combatant using this prohibited tactic depends on the superior power's obedience to the corresponding law. Similarly, laws of warfare prohibit combatants from using civilian settlements, populations or facilities as military bases, but when an inferior power uses this tactic, it depends on the premise that the superior power will respect the law that they are violating, and will not attack that civilian target, or if they do the propaganda advantage will outweigh the material loss.

Conclusion

"Subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence"

- Sun Tzu, Art of War

This famous quotation of Sun Tzu has led many to keep searching for silver bullets to defeat potential adversaries. Some might be tempted to look at asymmetric strategies as potential silver bullets in future wars. However, predictions about future wars always tend to be upset by "unk-unks" - unknown unknowns. Developing strategic analytical capabilities will prove vital in both

dealing with and in employing asymmetric strategies. After all, the highest realisation of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans, not his soldiers and you cannot know the enemy's plans unless you understand the enemy himself.

But just as it would be wrong to assume that asymmetric strategies will always be effective against any enemy, it would also be reckless to assume that one's adversaries will not challenge through conventional military combat. The practice of war, once the prerogative of the strong, "is instead increasingly the tactic of the weak". The more a nation shows a disdain for violence, the more violence it invites upon itself – this is the truth being proved in the Indian context. However, major conventional wars may not become obsolete after all. Such wars may prove to be the greater challenge for nations in the longer term.

End Notes

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