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ASYMMETRIC CHALLENGES AND THEIR IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Abstract:

Looking beyond the results of 9/11 wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq it is obvious that the attention of the American nation as well as of world society is focused on the future. The international political arena is concentrated on new asymmetric challenges and conventional warfare. What is now described as asymmetrical warfare is by no means a new phenomenon in military history or in the American experience. There are some situations, when opposing military forces choose completely different positions and approaches to warfare and it dates back to the first military encounters between armed forces (particularly since the end of the Cold War). What is Asymmetric warfare and why its emergence is so important in the contemporary world? The answers to these question will be answered in this paper.

Keywords:

Asymmetric Threats, Asymmetric Warfare, to combat, strategy, tactics, military power, enemy

Introduction

As Donald M. Snow, the professor of Political science and international affairs at the University of Alabama and the author of dozen books on defence

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policy defines, the definition of the word “security” is what makes people feel safe. It means that security has both physical and psychological aspects and each of them has different values. The discussion about these aspects of security can be divided in two concerns. The first is - changing balance between military and nonmilitary sources of the concern about security. The second is what actors in international politics enjoy making changes and how the level of security is changing accordingly.

Formulating the assessment of a threat environment is one of the crucial point in the formulation of strategy and defense doctrine of any country. It might be a naturally critical process that tries to free policymakers from incorrect, old, misjudged perceptions about the threat. Therefore, the nature of the threat(s) the United States or any other government faces is the subject of a never-ending debate.

What is asymmetry and what constitutes an asymmetric threat?

“Asymmetric warfare” is a term that appeared in the U.S. government documents and academic writing in the late 1990s but in 2003 its meaning decreased. The term was very meaningful and significant from the 9/11 for scholars and government from bombs to supercomputer viruses to nuclear proliferation. As it meant so many different things it became an ambiguous and useless term.

As Captain David L. Buffalo claims in his article “Defining asymmetric warfare”, it is hard to understand the meaning of the concept of asymmetric warfare as it has always been challenging. During the Cold War, when the world was divided into two parts, each of them lived in fear not to be defeated by another, thus peace was secured through mutually assured destruction (MAD). The 9/11 terrorist attacks, was the turning point of the main political events of the 20th century that has changed many concepts. After the destruction of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar order, 9/11 proved that a new enemy breaks rules, respects no national boundaries.

Webster’s dictionary defines asymmetry as “not symmetrical” or “incommensurable”. Asymmetric threats according to some military journals arise from threats of “not fighting fair” or attacking a weak point characterized as asymmetric warfare. “This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin – war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. ...It preys on economic unrest and ethnic conflicts. It requires in those situations where we must counter it, and these are the kinds of challenges that will be before us in

the next decade if freedom is to be saved, a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.”²

The statement seemed to be strange and different of that time as if it hit the mark, but the speaker was President John F. Kennedy and he was addressing the West Point Class of 1962. The Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Armed Forces and the head of the U.S. bureaucracy called for evolution – forty years ago, brought out the essence of typical asymmetric warfare³.

According to the American strategic documents transnational challenge is perceived as a political jargon and as a modern international political threat in aegis of transforming world order and in aegis of the USA National Security Policy implications. It is associated with another new dangerous phenomenon – asymmetric warfare. This form of warfare has attracted more attention with the shifting focus on the phenomenon of terrorism, particularly after the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington. Asymmetric warfare is a war between belligerents whose relative military power differs significantly, or whose strategy or tactics differ significantly. Asymmetrical warfare occurs whenever two sides fight differently. It is a situation where one of the rivals fight conventionally while another uses unconventional methods of fighting.

The most obvious and controversial aspect of asymmetrical warfare is the rejection of conventional means of conduct by one side. These two sides are dissimilar and out of balance with one another in that they are not mirrors of one another. It is also worth mentioning that there might be three the most important difference between them: in objectives, in organization and in methods. American forces set the best example of asymmetrical warfare as they fight in conventional European manner - with very clear goals for forces, wearing the standardized military uniforms, distinguishable conveyances, following the rules stated in the Geneva Conventions on Warfare of August 1949. While the opponent on the other hand, may be organized informally, not wearing uniforms, even may be hiding in urban areas among women, children and elderly that is considered to be cowardly and dishonest behaviour that is comparison to those rules of European-style warfare.

For several years U.S. policymakers, officials, and writers on defence have employed the terms “asymmetric” or “asymmetry” to characterize everything from the nature of the threats we face to the nature of war and beyond. Some

² Cit. R. B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla*, Vol. 2, Lincoln 2002, p. 751.

³ Cit. D. L. Buffalo, *Defining asymmetric warfare. Land warfare papers*, No. 58, Virginia 2006, p. 1.

critics claim that threats should be categorized on the basis of the significance of the target. In that case the threats displayed on September 11, 2001, would clearly be recognized as strategic. It is clear that a threat environment that is now multidimensional, can be launched from anywhere on earth, from space, from underwater to space and vice versa, or through the air, land, sea, underwater, and from space to any of the other media enumerated here. These threats, both strategic and tactical, comprise traditional anti-access strategies along with proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and potential information warfare. Some foreign military analysts believe that, in some cases, their countries have already been subjected to these new forms of threats.

According to Stephen J. Blank in modern era, asymmetric threats refers terrorism, unconventional or guerrilla tactics or guerrilla warfare as has been attempted in Iraq and Afghanistan, the use of WMD, cyberwarfare, or information war (IW). Furthermore, ballistic missiles have been also considered as asymmetric threats. These definitions may also include weapon systems and technologies dedicated to defeating the accuracy strike and engagement capabilities. Therefore, they are also called counter precision-engagement capabilities or threats⁴.

The series of terrorist strikes in Russia in the second half of 2004 were as great a traumatic experience for the Russians as the 9/11 attacks were for the Americans. The hostage-taking and ensuing massacre in the North Ossetian town of Beslan by Chechen suicide attackers demonstrated that militarily weaker opponents want to influence confrontations.

In asymmetrical wars the parties are unequal and the principle of equality of arms no longer holds true. The belligerents have disparate aims and employ dissimilar means and methods to pursue their tactics and strategies.

Asymmetric warfare can be characterized as a concept which is different from traditional warfare chiefly because of its manifestation in many forms making it all more difficult to achieve or understand. Traditional warfare is usually fought between nation states; however, asymmetric warfare can be carried out by non state actors. Asymmetric warfare has many synonyms and related terms such as guerrilla warfare, irregular warfare, low intensity conflict, proxy war and fourth generation warfare.

As Captain David L. Buffalo writes, when the term “asymmetric warfare” is used the meaning associates with catastrophic terrorist attacks to activists, roadside bombs, to proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to cyberterrorism. Accordingly, when a term means so many different things to so many people, it easily loses its usefulness. Many critics and scholars put an

⁴ S. J. Blank, *Rethinking asymmetric threats*, Carlisle 2003, p. 3.

effort in definition of the term and its meaning, but until now the particular meaning of the term is vague.

Modern approach

In our fast moving world there are several concerns that can be outlined with an understanding of International politics relative to understanding the problem of national security.

The first can be formulated as the following question:

- Is the National Security destroyed by the changed environmental affects in both, physical and psychological senses?
- Is the world a riskier place than it used to be during the Cold War?

Answering all the questions set above was much easier in Cold War period than it is now, because the threats Great Actors are facing was better understood, clearer and more concrete than now. If, for example there was a threat of tank building from Soviet Union, the United States would responds by building some extra and additional antitank weapons. The situation is neither so obvious today nor easy, as the risks the U.S. faces today are controversial and diverse. Who would maintain that the U.S. has devised effective ways to confront the kind of terrorism that maximizes results and minimizes resources expended in the effort? In order to understand these concepts and attempt to deal with the reality, it is necessary to adopt some intellectual frameworks to understand the meaning of events, causes and effects, and realize what will be the best solution in those difficult situations. Developing a framework or “realist paradigm” can be the best tool to comprehend and work out the rules of “the game”. Professor Donald Snow compares the baseball game players to the international actors of politics. As the game players are catching, hitting the ball, causing other players to run around in some manner and finally there is a winner as well as a loser; the same rules work for international political “players”. Understanding the “Rules of the game” is the most important part as Many scholars believe that International relations are realism and the framework provided for organizing the rules of the game is the “realistic paradigm”. As professor Donald Snow claims, organizing the policy response to the emerging Cold War competition can be described as realistic paradigms as a result of the following concepts: *power, self-interest, conflicts and war*⁵.

It is obvious that, *Realism and realist paradigm* emerged from the American experience in the World War II as the dominant view of American national

⁵ S. Metz, *Strategic Asymmetry*, “Military Review”, 2001 pp. 23-31.

security. Even when the Cold War ended and many of the circumstances that helped meld the realist paradigm disappeared, the realist paradigm remained the largely unchallenged priority and underpinning of American security policy⁶.

Is asymmetrical warfare a new phenomenon?

“The story of David and Goliath”, from the Old Testament, proves the answer. The story describes the moment when the Philistine army had gathered for war against Israel. The two armies faced each other, camped for battle on opposite sides of a steep valley. The Israelites terrified of fighting the great Philistine giant measuring over nine feet tall. His name was Goliath. Wearing full armour he came out each day for forty days, mocking and challenging the Israelites to fight. The young shepherd David took up the challenge. David dressed in his simple tunic, carrying his shepherd's staff, sling, and a pouch full of stones. He threw a smooth stone at the giant's forehead and Goliath fell face down onto the ground. David ran over to him, drew the giant's sword from its sheath, stabbed him with it and then lopped off his head, whereupon the Philistine soldiers fled in panic⁷.

The biblical story shows that asymmetrical warfare is not a new phenomenon. Participation of a civilian – a youngster – underlines the equality of warriors that are engaged in combat. The most striking moment in the story is the act of beheading that caused panic among the Philistine soldiers and allowed victory to be won.

Asymmetrical warfare favours certain behaviour, but contrary to the story of David and Goliath, the apparently weaker warrior does not necessarily win the battle, much less then war. Three thousand years ago, a Chinese military thinker Sun Tzu (whose existence is doubtful) is believed to have created a military manual “The Art of War”. The main advice of Sun Tzu's philosophy centres on knowing how to fight and when to fight. ” When the enemy advances, we retreat. When the enemy halts, we harass. When the enemy seeks to avoid the battle, we attack, when the enemy retreats, we pursue.” In other words, one should only fight in his terms. He also mentions that on the battlefield the victor is a combatant, who observes and understands his opponents ‘s tactics so well, that he is able to deceive him and alter the battle to his own advantage⁸.

⁶ V. M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis/Classic and Contemporary Theory*, Lanham 2006.

⁷ *Old Testament, The story of David and Goliath*, 1 Samuel, Chapters 16-18.

⁸ D. M. Snow, *National Security for a New Era*, Tuscaloosa 2011.

Currently a new and noticeably crucial factor is that acts of terror are the main part of asymmetrical warfare. In extreme cases, like that of al-Qaeda, that type of action becomes the main war strategy. According to scholars, it has three salient features: First, traditional military and legally accepted methods of fighting are deliberately opposed in favour, for example, of the hijacking of airliners and their disloyal deployment against civilian objects and civilians.

Secondly, the aim of this strategy may cause even greater loss of human life, non-military and economic damage, possibly through the use of prohibited devices, in other words biological and chemical weapons. Thirdly, there is not any particular territory for the strategy, as the terrorist acts can be committed anywhere and at any time.

The fundamental aim of asymmetrical warfare is to find a way round the enemy's military strength by studying, analyzing and discovering in the extreme, its weaknesses.

Gaining information about weaker parties, particularly in modern societies, means that after striking "soft targets" societies will face the greatest damage. Consequently, civilian targets frequently replace military ones⁹.

Conclusion

Asymmetrical warfare is a methodology for conducting antagonism by a weaker player against the superior military opponent, especially if the victory occurs on the stronger player's terms. As the United States is militarily the most powerful state, choosing asymmetrical manners of fighting is becoming more and more obvious for potential opponents to American power that creates unique challenging environment for the United States in the post 9/11 period. Asymmetrical warfare is physically and theoretically different in comparison of other traditional warfare. Preparation to fight in asymmetrical environment demands other forms of military activities and it may considerably vary from the symmetric methods of fighting.

It is obvious that in the twenty-first century wars are becoming more and more complex and unequal. The central part of the concern with the asymmetrical warfare is where it is concentrated: in the developing world. An emphasis on conflict situations in developing world opens up numerous avenues of controversy and in response the United States place its major intellectual efforts on thinking about major symmetrical warfare and combating exclusively.

⁹ R. Ondrejcsak, *Introduction to Security Studies*, Bratislava 2014.

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