Deconstructing Asymmetric Warfare and Asymmetry in Warfare

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The conceptual differences in the two terms — asymmetric warfare and asymmetry in warfare — have connotations not far removed from the terms information warfare and information in warfare. The term "asymmetric warfare" has been not only of recent origin, but like most military vocabulary today, has been adopted across the world, hook, line and sinker, from American semantics. But we need far better understanding of the term than what is available since asymmetry and the search for favourable symmetry have historically been at the core of warfare. Favourable symmetry between organised military systems was sought through numerous means and methods ranging from unequal size (as symbolised in the Napoleonic dictum that "God is on the side of bigger battalions"), superior technology and weapons, advantage through superior strategy and tactics of force employment, etc. Every revolution in military affairs (RMA) has created asymmetry in warfare till it was balanced out by the adversary and the opposing RMA. For example, introduction of air power in wars added a completely new dimension with the exploitation of the third dimension providing enormous advantage to the side that could exploit it better and dominate the other side. It created a profound asymmetry in warfare in favour of the side that has been able to dominate in and from the air; and now this quality is extended to the complete vertical dimension, all the way to outer space.

Where military power and forces were more or less evenly matched, force employment strategy was the primary method for achieving favourable asymmetry in time and space. Liddell Hart, who articulated the "strategy of indirect approach" to gain crucial favourable symmetry in war, had written that:[1]

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> *Effective results in war have rarely been attained unless the approach has had such indirectness as to ensure the opponent's unreadiness to meet it*. The indirectness has usually been physical, and always psychological. In strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home …. To move along the line of natural expectations consolidates the opponent's balance and thus increases his resistance power. (Emphasis added)

"Asymmetric Warfare"

The term "asymmetric warfare" is just about a decade old and it has spawned many other related or similar semantics like "Fourth Generation War," "Post-Modern Warfare," etc. What is even more notable is that *"asymmetric warfare"* means different things to different people; and that leads to substantive confusion and lack of focus in trying to define a doctrine that could serve as the basis of strategy and tactics to employ military force. What is clear is that the factor of uncertainty inherent in, and intrinsic to, warfare assumes even greater salience in asymmetric warfare, however it gets defined.

The roots of most modern military semantics may be found in American military terminology and "asymmetric warfare" is no different. It would be useful to remember that the use of this term is new in US official circles. It does not appear in the 1990 Base Force, the 1993 Bottom-Up Review, and the 1995 Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces, or in any annual Secretary of Defence's Report to the Congress until 1999. In fact, the first mention of the term was in the 1997 Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) report. Since then, the asymmetric threat industry has been working overtime. The National Defence Panel that shadowed the QDR effort, the 1999 US Commission on National Security/21st Century, and a host of other analyses has since weighed in on its significance. The National Defence University, in the 1998 edition of its annual *Strategic Assessment*, devoted an entire chapter to asymmetric threats, whereas in previous volumes the term had never been mentioned.

The concept also made an appearance with the publication of the US "National Military Strategy" in 1997 for the first time, and also in the National Security Strategy. The 1999 Joint Strategy Review, an internal analytical study prepared annually for the chairman, focussed on the asymmetric threat. In December 1999, "A National Security Strategy for a New Century," the fundamental national security document of the United States, defined asymmetric warfare to signify "unconventional approaches that avoid or undermine our strengths while exploiting our vulnerabilities." In other

definitions, it has been held, on the one hand, to denote non-conventional means and, on the other, to indicate an overwhelming superiority. But, in effect, it encompasses both since it implies a state of military imbalance.

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As noted earlier, asymmetric warfare means different things to different people. The term has often been used synonymously with "fourth generation warfare," low-intensity conflict operations (LICO), "unconventional war," and so on. But the historical record of warfare is replete with instances of "unconventional" (or rather, what was unconventional at that time) approaches to defeat the enemy. Deception, camouflage, subversion, etc. have been standard tools of warfare. Use of new weapons and tactics invariably brought a new dimension to war, as much as the use of unarmed civil airliners by terrorists on 9/11 displayed an unconventional approach to terrorism. Guerrilla warfare has traditionally sought to pursue a similar strategy; and, hence, would qualify (in a greater measure than 'regular' warfare) for the asymmetric warfare nomenclature. Mao's "People's War" eminently qualifies for the label of asymmetric warfare, and so does that fought by the Viet Cong in Vietnam where ideologically motivated manpower-intensive guerrilla forces avoided set-piece battles till the Tet offensive when they took on the weakened US-South Vietnam military forces.

The US sponsored, Pakistan prosecuted war waged by the Afghan "Mujahideen" with sophisticated military-specification weapons during the 1980s against the Soviet-Afghan military forces in Afghanistan was asymmetric in nature and content. As the Mujahideen war wound down in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, Pakistan launched its own "asymmetric" war through religious terrorism against India in Punjab and then in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). In a fundamentally distorted interpretation, the Pakistani military leadership at the highest level had been invoking the Holy Quran to legitimise the use of terror in war against enemies.[2]

There is also a mistaken belief that asymmetric warfare is waged by the weak against the strong. The war in Afghanistan in the 1980s waged by the United States against the Soviet Union through proxies could hardly be considered as one waged by the weak against the powerful! But regardless of definitions, all evidence points to the reality that while the fighters may be weaker in terms of weapons, technology and force levels, they are often backed by powerful states

and entities that provide the resources and directions to operations. A nuclear armed Pakistan with a strong conventional military force and a significant support from the external world, waging a war through terror against India could hardly be considered a weak contestant. The Taliban or Al Qaeda could hardly be considered weak against the sole superpower, otherwise the United States should have been able to eliminate them in the first few weeks after 9/11. On the other hand, the first three weeks of the 2003 Iraq War were asymmetric in terms of military technology, strategy and tactics; and assumed another dimension of it after the US disbanded the Iraqi military and police forces and failed to provide for an acceptable peace and restoration of Iraq.

The basic question, therefore, that arises is: how does asymmetrical warfare differ from warfare as such? Such conceptual clarity is needed if we are to deal effectively and successfully with the phenomenon termed as asymmetric warfare in recent years and enunciate a doctrine for the type of war that needs to be waged. One possibility is the coincidence of the emergence of the term with terrorist acts on US forces across the world, climaxing with the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, employing the unconventional approach of flying unarmed civil airliners into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Would a war pursued through terrorism and counter-terrorism, including the American-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), then, qualify for the title of asymmetric warfare?

Asymmetry in Warfare

Asymmetry has been integral to warfare, and is central to both the Sun Tzu and Clausewitzian expositions of war. Most of the generally accepted Principles of War, ranging from surprise, concentration of force, mobility, firepower, *et al,* are aimed at generating and exploiting favourable asymmetry in time and space. The attainment of asymmetry is imperative in every military operation, and a decisive military victory would require its development at some stage of the conflict. In fact, starting from deterrence through combatant force structures to employment of military power, it is essentially asymmetry (and its exploitation) which holds the key to success. The classical doctrines of war-fighting, whether based on attrition, manoeuvre, or the theory of the indirect approach, all seek to create a favourable asymmetry in military terms. Even psychological warfare aims finally to achieve a favourable asymmetry through the state of the human mind, morale and will. The classical concept of numerical superiority in certain force ratios, force-to-space ratios, etc. in attrition warfare, or the strategy of indirect approach brilliantly expounded by Liddell Hart as an essential

prerequisite for success in offensive action is predicated on similar values.

In earlier wars, the primary means of achieving decisive asymmetries were essentially based on human courage and skill of the fighting man, and operational (tactical and strategic) surprise. In warfare involving well trained military forces, tactical surprise to achieve asymmetry became an almost prime factor of success; and, hence, the importance and value of the "art" of generalship. Generalship remained more an art as long as the commander was unable to see or even "guess what was at the other side of the hill." However, the industrial and scientific revolution has had a profound impact on the prime means of achieving asymmetry. Starting with the grooved rifle and connoidal bullet in the mid-19th century, technological growth has been accelerating the pace of war. The importance of the individual combatant, in fact, has increased manifold. But even more important are the basic changes that have taken place in the means of achieving asymmetry.

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One of the continuing elements of such asymmetric warfare is covert warfare, especially the increased incidence of, and resort to, sponsored trans-national terrorism and militancy. In many respects, this represents a continuum of the change in the nature of using armed violence though at a lower level of the war spectrum. On the other hand, modern democratic states find it difficult to evolve adequate responses to trans-national terrorism although different countries have adopted different strategies. The relative apparent success of this method of warfare may be expected to provide greater incentives for countries and non-state actors to pursue this approach in the future. Technology, if anything, has so far favoured the terrorist and the guerrilla rather than the organised state fighting terrorism. More often than not, the weapons and equipment of the terrorist are superior to those of the security forces that have to cope with them. More important, the terrorist combines the advantage of the guerrilla with that of modern fighting weapons because of the surprise and concentration of firepower inherent in the initiative in armed violence resting with the terrorist. The state is forced to constantly respond to the terrorist in a reactive process which puts the state at a distinct disadvantage.

"Sub-Conventional" Rather than "Asymmetric" Warfare

Since all contestants have sought asymmetric advantages in traditional wars, we can at best term the prevalent nature of wars which are not being fought between the regular organised military force of a state against the organised military force of another state (the classical conventional war) as "sub-conventional," which in some cases has shown signs of approaching the semi-conventional level. The reason is that asymmetry in warfare only implies a strategy not a threat or a form of warfare. But where one contestant relies on combatants not organised in traditional military structures and mostly employs innovative means and methods with known systems and technologies, it would be more appropriate to term it as "sub-conventional war" (where at least one contestant fights below the level of conventional war) rather than calling it asymmetric war. It needs to be emphasised that the search for asymmetry for military advantage would remain intrinsic to, and a critical element of, conventional as well as sub-conventional warfare.

States undertaking sub-conventional war have normally carried it out through proxies which may be other states, semi-state actors and/or non-state actors. Such wars have been mostly managed and conducted through intelligence agencies and mechanisms that permit a strong factor of deniability. Colonel Oliver North's covert Iran-Contra operations are a case in point. The promotion of narcotics in Afghanistan-Pakistan to generate funds and creation of institutions like the BCCI (Bank of Credit and Commerce International) based in Dubai, etc. to channel them are symptomatic. There are a number of factors individually or collectively that have led states and groups/actors to opt for sub-conventional wars:

- The cost of victory and defeat could be extremely high. This is particularly so when nuclear weapons exist with the prime actors on both sides of the conflict spectrum. Most of the wars in the developing countries sponsored by the superpowers during the Cold War (especially once they had reached a degree of mutual assured destruction capability in the 1960s) fall into this category.
- It is consciously pursued to weaken a superior military power to enable conventional military force to be applied to advantage. Mao's "People's War" doctrine was premised on this rationale; so was the launching of the irregular covert war by Pakistan against India in 1947 and again in August 1965, followed in both cases by the offensive with regular military forces. The launching of terrorist fighters in the two key districts of Punjab (through which crucial lines of communications to J&K pass) after 1983 (while attempting to grab territory in Siachen region in the north), its escalation in

1988 and concurrent escalation of *jihadi* terrorism in J&K (which was followed by the conventional invasion across the Line of Control in the Kargil sector with its army in 1999) appear to present a continuing strategy of covert sub-conventional war.

- Guerrilla warfare has been historically pursued by the weaker military party to offset the stronger player's conventional advantage
- Applying military power while maintaining deniability of involvement, thus, reducing the risk and potential of the adversary launching a punitive response (unless the level of destruction increases markedly) with its military forces. Political and diplomatic manoeuvring space is also enhanced by maintaining deniability.
- As a long-term strategy to weaken and/or undermine the core values (like liberal democratic principles, secularism, etc.), especially by provoking security measures against terrorism. Pakistan's concept of "bleeding India through a thousand cuts" is symptomatic.
- In pursuit of geo-political goals through the use of extremist religious and other ideologically driven violence. The Shining Path movement in Latin America, the resistance in Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan-Pakistan, Al Qaeda, etc. are typical examples.

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There are large variations of detail in the organisation, means and methods of different sub-conventional wars which need to be factored in specifically when dealing with a particular situation. The basic attributes of an inevitably asymmetric (but essentially, sub-conventional) war revolve around the fundamental mismatch in means, methods and ends of the contesting parties. This becomes more visible when one party is ostensibly composed of "non-state-actors" (NSAs). But the weight of evidence points to the majority of such NSAs being supported by states and semi-state institutions (like intelligence agencies) and even private entities roped in for financial support, etc.

A central characteristic of sub-conventional warfare is the much higher levels of **uncertainty** generated in such form of warfare, especially by the side that possesses initiative and whose target is the population at large. A major difference between conventional and sub-conventional wars is that the centre

of gravity (of the adversary) occupies a crucial position in war-fighting aims and strategy. This does not go away in sub-conventional wars. But to this gets added the centre of vulnerability in sub-conventional war more prominently. The population, for example, is the centre of gravity for both parties in conventional and sub-conventional wars. But the population also constitutes the centre of vulnerability of the target state in a sub-conventional war.

In fact, **population becomes the centre of vulnerability for both the (non-state) enemy as well as the state defending itself** against it. Uncertainty, of course, is intrinsic to any form of warfare, and the fog of war exacerbates the problem. The high potential for surprise in a sub-conventional war compounds the factor of uncertainty. And the chances that initiative would rest with the NSAs engaging in terrorist acts not only enhances the asymmetric dimension, but places the state defending against such onslaught at that much greater disadvantage. This is even more significant where terror is used as the principle strategy by the non-state actor and entity since terrorists hold the initiative in a sub-conventional war and operate in very small groups and/or individually while undertaking attacks. This process is facilitated by the fact that the civilian population, especially in a liberal democratic state, is much more vulnerable to this type of aggression.

Accurate, timely and time-sensitive intelligence is crucial in combating sub-conventional war — perhaps even more than in a conventional war. Doctrine and strategy to counter sub-conventional war must focus on intelligence as the central tool to create the conditions for dominating the aggressors. This by itself would be of little value if a rapid response to the evolving situation is either not possible because capabilities and procedures have not been created toward that end, or the means to do so are deficient.

A second aspect of the pervasive uncertainties that impact sub-conventional wars is that coping with uncertainty entails special efforts and demands on military leaders. Dealing with uncertainty and the likely strategy and tactics of the enemy requires military leaders at all levels to be able to foresee, forecast, and plan their counter-measures in time to achieve success. This may often require preemptive strikes against fleeting, small targets in a confusing and foggy operational environment. Counter-terrorism in particular requires quick on the spot decisions by junior leaders and often even by jawans. Equally important, but more crucial where the contestants close in with each other, is the issue of a rapidly reducing the time span between sensing the threat and the shooter coming into play. In other words, the organised military has to win under circumstances when situation awareness would be low, the enemy would hold the initiative in most cases, and the sensor-to-shooter time would be much

lower for the terrorist and the dispersed militant non-state actors.

Since sub-conventional warfare has come to stay, leadership training (and even selection) and command and control issues have to be adjusted to provide a high level of delegated authority to the junior leadership and they have to be accustomed to assume the role they must perform, with a flexible mind and quick decision-making. Sub-conventional wars cannot be won with traditional set-piece strategies and tactics. Successfully countering the enemy in such wars, therefore, requires leaders at all levels to think creatively, and developing mental flexibility becomes a critical attribute. This would be of little advantage if it is not accompanied by extraordinary delegation of authority down the leadership chain to the last jawan or pilot. This also implies that mistakes could be made; but action taken to curb mistakes must not be allowed to curb initiative and creativity/innovation.

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Sub-conventional warfare (and much of the guerrilla warfare employing asymmetric strategies) differs from regular conventional wars in many ways and these must be borne in mind at all times. Over the decades and centuries, the international community has brought forth laws (like the Geneva Convention, etc.) governing armed conflict. And the international community is very conscious of these laws and their potential breach. Norms (like minimal collateral damage, the principle of proportionality, etc.) have also grown in restraining the scope and intensity of use of military force by a state. Humanitarian issues have attracted strong attention from the international community.

On the other hand, the other contestant, the non-state-actor in a sub-conventional warfare scenario does not respect such laws and norms. He is beyond the pale of laws of armed conflict and humanitarian considerations. Targeting of innocent civilian populations in terrorist attacks consciously aims to violate humanitarian laws and norms. This creates a political-psychological asymmetry in the war. In fact, the targeting of innocent civilians by terrorists takes place consciously and deliberately in order to provoke the defending liberal democratic state to produce quick results and possibly use excessive force. The handicaps for the defending state are obvious, especially in a world where humanitarian rights have assumed great salience.

Notes

1. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, second revised edition (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 25.
2. See Brig. S.K. Malik, *The Quranic Concept of War* (Lahore: Wajidalis, 1979), pp. In fact, Gen. Zia ul-Haq, the then chief martial law administrator of Pakistan, in his introduction strongly endorsed the book and this interpretation.