# Asymmetric War: A Conceptual Understanding

**M R Sudhir**

> *The conventional army loses if it does not win. The guerrilla wins if he does not lose.*
>
> **- Henry Kissinger, 1969**

The term *asymmetric war* is a product of the revolution in military affairs (RMA). It can be taken as fresh jargon to distinguish the modern variant from traditional partisan and guerrilla war conducted by irregular bands using unconventional methods. In short, it is nothing new; only the cosmopolitan veneer is so. Since the Indian Army has vast experience dating to the pre-independence period in combating this form of warfare, there is no major cause for concern in being confronted with yet another outbreak of asymmetric warfare within the country or a new Americanism from military schools and think-tanks of a perplexed superpower.

While understanding the term *asymmetric war*, an attempt is made here to see it in the Indian context, and to recommend measures to combat the same.
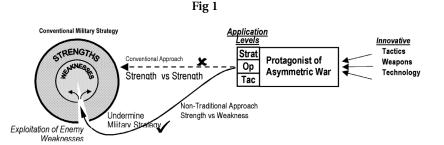
## Understanding Asymmetric War

### *Definition*

The definition of *'asymmetric warfare'* is best borrowed from the US from where the term has originated. The 1999 *Joint Strategy Review* specifically defines *"asymmetry as something done to military forces to undermine their conventional military strength."* Asymmetric approaches are attempts to circumvent or undermine military strength while exploiting their weaknesses, using methods that differ significantly from the expected method of operations.

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Such approaches generally seek a major psychological impact, such as shock or confusion that affects an opponent's initiative, freedom of action, or will. These approaches often employ innovative, non-traditional tactics, weapons, or technology, and can be applied at all levels of warfare — strategy, operations and tactics — across the spectrum of military operations.

**Fig 1**



## Asymmetry in Strength, Tactics and Technology

Introduction of the term 'asymmetric' owes to preponderance of American military power in relation to any of its adversaries today. To redress this, the adversary relies on unconventional means and methods characterised as *asymmetric warfare*. Aside from the David-Goliath analogy in which the preponderant power is akin to Goliath, David's *tactics* are also used by the lesser power to even the contest. Thus, asymmetry is not only in terms of strength but also in changing the terms of reference of the contest from *conventional to unconventional*. The two routes to even out the equation are *high technology* and *low technology*. High technology would amount to, for instance, acquisition of weapon of mass destruction by rogue states, while low technology is more familiar in the form of insurgency.

## Asymmetric War versus Terrorism

Examining *'terrorism'* reveals two variants: one as an end in itself such as that indulged in by anarchist elements, and the other as the means to a political end such as that of the Naxalites. Terrorism as a means to an end is generally a tactics of the weaker side in an asymmetric conflict. This tactic is to influence to the point of paralysis, the decision-making faculties of opponents and, thereby, acquire psychological ascendancy, thus, redressing conventional imbalance. It can be used by the stronger side also in the form of 'shock and awe'. Asymmetric warfare is sometimes called *terrorism* by those wishing to deny the political aims of their opponents by exploiting the negative connotations of the word for its propaganda value. This is often resorted to by the stronger side, while the weaker uses the counter-term: state terrorism.
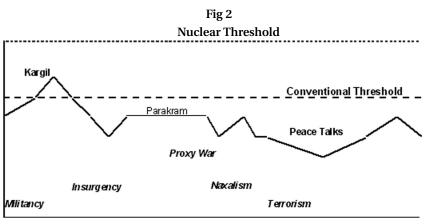
## Adaptation to Asymmetric War

It is the weaker side that usually resorts to asymmetric war to offset its disadvantage. However, if asymmetric war is taken as requiring innovative, creative and out-of-the-box thinking, then it is capable of adaptation by stronger conventionally-configured militaries also. The adaptability of armies can make them asymmetric-war-friendly as has been the case with the successes of the Indian Army. This has not been the experience of the Americans, principally because their high-technology and high-on-firepower militarised approach, instead of a boots-on-the-ground, politically predominant one, has resulted in intensification of opposition rather than its pacification. This explains the urgent attention to "Asymmetric Warfare" in Western discourse, as also indicates that *there is no major immediacy for our army to replicate the discussion or depart from our time tested adaptation to asymmetric war.*

# The Indian Context

## Threshold for Asymmetric Warfare

In the Indian context, asymmetric warfare is a cocktail of militancy, insurgency, proxy war and terrorism that has been the challenge to the country and the army from Kashmir to Sri Lanka and from Punjab to the northeast. This term not only describes unconventional conflict but also the method to address India's asymmetrical power employed by Pakistan. The advantage for Pakistan has been to preserve itself from a conventional Indian response, even while progressing its strategic aims by keeping within the Indian threshold of provocation.
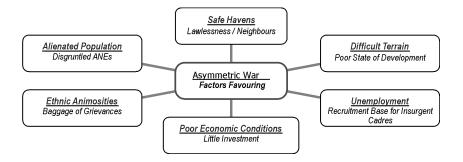
**Fig 2**
**Nuclear Threshold**



**Keeping the Pot Boiling Below Conventional Threshold**

## Environment for Waging Asymmetric War

The advantages for an assortment of mercenaries, Islamists, insurgents/militants and Naxalites in asymmetric conflicts in India have been safe havens in the form of supportive neighbouring states or difficult terrain, alienation to varying degrees in the population due to political and economic factors, underdevelopment, enabling unemployed youth to join as insurgent recruits, and historical and ethnic animosities and causes. Terrorism in India has been a tactic employed largely to coerce the population and government so as to make it amenable to terrorist diktat and to dry up any intelligence coming forth from the population. Terror tactics are also employed to draw disproportionate reactions from the security forces so as to further alienate the populace. It is propaganda in action in that it sends the message of a situation or area out-of-government-control, and by implication that it is one controlled by terrorists.

**Fig 3**



## Naxalites

The Naxalites operate in a vacuum created by the absence of administration and political institutions, espouse the local demands and take advantage of the disenchantment prevalent among the exploited segments. They seek to offer an alternate system of governance which promises emancipation of these segments from the clutches of the exploiter through the barrel of a gun. The protracted people's war through armed struggle aims to capture political power. Naxal violence is not fed by class-caste-ethno-linguistic-religious animosities. The violence is classless. The Naxal leadership seems to be working under a well-conceptualised plan of amalgamating the underdeveloped regions of the

nation, exploiting the vulnerabilities of the politicians, the lack of governance and socio-economic development and, more important, the utter failure of the intelligence and security set-up of the states.

## Indian Approach to Asymmetric Warfare

In India's counter-insurgency/ counter-terrorism doctrine, the power at the spear end is absolutely controlled and kept to minimal. Saturation of the affected area brings to bear the real Indian strength in low technology, low cost numbers. The Indian Army's strength has been the mass army, and it has capitalised on this facet in containing multiple terrorism-laced proxy-wars and insurgencies. Another contrast to the experiences elsewhere is in the fact that India is engaged in its own land and with its own people. Therefore, its time horizon and definition of success is of necessity at variance with that of other nations. In effect, there is an "Indian way" for Indian conditions, whose characteristics are not necessarily transferable to another situation.

## Comprehensive Strategy

The "Indian way" has a strategic consistency in dealing with these situations. The broad contours of this strategy include Indian patience, tackling terrorism on multiple fronts ranging from development initiatives to political ones depending on the intensity of the insurgency, political control over the military, acting in aid of civil authority and never as a substitute for it, moderation in the military grip to suit the circumstance, presence of civic action in the military repertoire where the military is the principle representative of a functioning state and a cultural sensitivity in an age of clashes along fault lines. India's economic trajectory has also permeated such disturbed regions so as to change perceptions on the desirability of political association with India over disassociation.
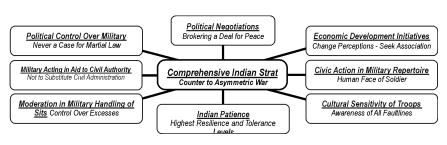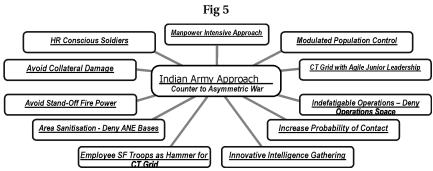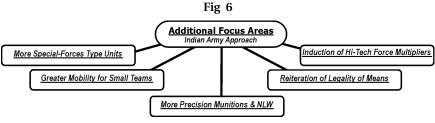
**Fig 4**

## Indian Army Approach

The strengths of the Indian Army as part of this strategy have been demonstrated. These include a manpower-intensive approach relying on a counter-terror (CT) grid operated by an agile junior leadership, indefatigable operations to deny insurgents space and increase the probability of contact, innovation in intelligence gathering such as through raising of militia and employment of special forces (SF) teams to act as the hammer to the anvil provided by troops on the grid. Area sanitisation to preclude build-up of bases despite the type of terrain, avoidance of stand-off firepower, such as air power to minimise collateral damage and reduce alienation, population-control modulated to the levels of insurgent penetration and lately a human rights conscious interface with the affected people have been our hallmarks.

**Fig 5**



In effect, India already has a capable defence system in place. This may require fine tuning at best, such as more special forces type units, greater mobility for small teams, reiteration of legality of means-methods and more advanced technology force-multipliers (weapons, etc).

**Fig 6**



## Combating Asymmetric Warfare

*What is our aim ?...Victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror. Without victory, there is no survival.*

**- Winston Churchill, 1940**

## Proaction versus Reaction

In military analysis, there is usually a desire for proaction, although containing the situation also amounts to success. While extended open-ended deployments eat troops, they do not escalate the situation. Proaction is recommended against sponsors of terrorism. Keeping this option in abeyance sometimes has the advantage of keeping the influence of support by proxy to manageable levels, rather than having it overexposed in the counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism role. On the other hand, delaying the exposure of the military in disturbed areas, in the hope of reconciliation, can be double-edged, with the situation becoming irretrievable and necessitating much larger deployment at a subsequent stage. The judgement between the two ends of the spectrum — between proaction and reaction — is very fine.

## Focus of Governance

An offensive against the insurgent adversary in an asymmetric war would amount to more proaction on the part of the government in delivering on its contract with its citizenry. This implies provision of constitutionally mandated good governance. The specifics of this are developmental initiatives, negligible corruption, penetration of democracy, avenues for ventilation of civic grievances, minimal imposition on freedoms and speedy dispensation of justice. Diplomatic initiatives to ensure whittling of support from across the borders are necessary. The military component in this effort must recede in keeping with the levels of control obtained over the area. These constitute the political, diplomatic and military prongs of a counter to asymmetric war to be applied with an interchangeability of priority with improving of the situation.

**Fig 7**

Undoubtedly, the malaise is lack of governance, and political exploitation of the underdeveloped regions as is seen in *the Naxalite problem in nearly 160 districts of India. It urgently calls for addressal, lest it escalates, necessitating a military response.*
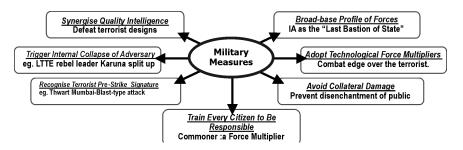
## Counter-Proxy War

In so far as a proactive response to the asymmetric war by proxy is concerned, such as the one being waged by Pakistan in Kashmir and lately being expanded to include the rest of India, our strategy has been multi-pronged. On the *diplomatic front*, there has been an engagement of Pakistan to mellow it, a strategic partnership with the US to *inter alia* bring our concerns to bear on the *'war on terror'*. Pakistan has been denied 'strategic depth' through our participation in the fall of the Taliban and legal multilateral instruments against terror being expanded. On the *political front,* there are several initiatives in Kashmir to include the round table talks and expert groups appointed in the summer of 2006. *Developmental initiatives* include the opening of railways into Kashmir, the dams on the Chenab and Jhelum and the trans-Pirpanjal road from Poonch. In the rest of India, the Sachar Report has identified areas for governmental initiatives so as to address the adverse socio-economic indices of the minority community that could be exploited by Pakistan. *Militarily,* the conventional deterrent has been kept honed with the defence budget set to cross Rs. one lakh crore for the first time in the forthcoming budget. Operation Parakram has enabled toning down, but not elimination, of external support for the asymmetric war. It is an Indian capability that its conventional war assets, particularly its infantry, are readily available and responsive in combating asymmetric warfare, a strength unique to our army.
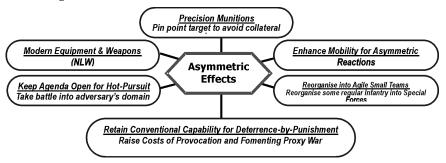
## Military Measures

While the broad Indian Army approach to asymmetric war has been explained earlier, there are various measures, both defence and offensive, which can enhance the efficacy in achieving greater successes against the protagonists of asymmetric warfare.

**(a) Defence Measures.** These are illustrated below (Fig 8).



**(b) Offensive Measures.** There are various measures that can take the asymmetric war into the domain of the protagonist. Some are illustrated as under (Fig 9).



## Conclusion

Concepts of foreign origin such as *'asymmetric war'* require to be approached in the light of Indian conditions and experience. In the case of asymmetric warfare, the Indian way has proved its worth to the extent that India was being enticed by the United States for a peace-keeping function in Iraq. The limitations of the American way are all too self-evident. Therefore, importing of a concept and resulting prescriptions must be cognisant of the coordinates of the source. Unreflective replication of external aims and methods would be contrary to the Indian genius.

The Indian military has exhibited considerable proficiency in the combating of various forms of asymmetric war that have been encountered so far. Honing its skills even further, equipping to give it more teeth and finesse, training to beat the adversary in his own game, while retaining the combat superiority in the conventional plane will serve to defeat the designs of all exponents of asymmetric war – be they internally driven or externally sponsored.