Asymmetric Conflicts and the South Asian Region

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Introduction

The South Asian region is of considerable strategic importance for the entire world. An example of the foregoing is the fact that various sea lanes of communication and trading routes from West Asia to the Far East pass through this region. Again, of the seven nations in South Asia, two are nuclear states. Yet, strange as it may seem, some South Asian nations, while grappling with insurgency, terrorism, fundamentalism, illegal migration, poverty and organised crime, plan conflicts with their neighbours similarly affected.

Due to the spread of information around the globe, development of technologies, industrialisation and international institutions like the UN, South Asian states may perhaps no longer be threatened by conventional wars. The revolution in military affairs (RMA) has also made conventional wars an outmoded concept in resolving disputes. While conventional war may be heading towards obsolescence, it would be naïve in the extreme to write an obituary of war in South Asia. Von Clausewitz's perceptive statement that "war is a continuation of (state) policy by other means" is germane to this issue. Since conventional wars in the traditional sense are presently not the preferred course of option, states are opting for asymmetric conflicts to achieve their end (policy). In fact, the asymmetric forms of conflict, inclusive of irregular warfare, low intensity conflict (LIC), insurgency movements, and terrorism have taken firm roots in the South Asian region. However, before examining the situation obtaining in the South Asian region in general and India's vulnerability to this form of warfare in particular, some substantive issues relating to asymmetric warfare need to be considered.

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Asymmetric Conflicts: Some Substantive Issues

While the term 'asymmetric' is new and was first used by the US establishment, asymmetric wars are as old as the history of mankind. In this regard, the attack by Pyrrus on Italy in 375 BC and the Seven Years War by Frederick the Great against Austria can be mentioned.[1] In fact, asymmetric conflicts in ancient and medieval Indian history have been well recorded. As, for example, the wars of Chandragupta, who, in the 5th century BC, forged an empire in ancient India from Taxila to Pataliputra, based on the Rajmandala (Statal circle) concept given by his preceptor Chanakya.[2] *En passant*, it may be mentioned that even the soldiers of Alexander the Great did not relish the prospect of fighting the powerful army of the Nandas and were subsequently vanquished by Chandragupta. During the medieval period, Shivaji was eminently successful in carving out an independent kingdom while waging asymmetric wars against the mighty Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb and the powerful kingdom of Bijapur.

Although the term 'asymmetric' has been coined by the American defence establishment, various thinkers, planners and analysts have sought to explain its meaning in their own way. In fact, one can be pardoned for thinking that there exist as many definitions of the term as there are parts of the body! The American thinkers, obsessed as they are with US security concerns, tend to view even the methodology used by an adversary to circumvent or undermine US strengths as asymmetric![3] Many writers are of the view that asymmetric form of warfare can be waged by any nation, whether weak or strong, vis-à-vis the opponent.[4] On the other hand, some thinkers feel that asymmetric wars or conflicts between nations are initiated by economically and militarily weaker powers against stronger nations.[5] A prerequisite here is that a situation of asymmetry in the balance of power must exist between the warring states. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour is, thus, an example of a weaker power attacking a stronger power. While micro differences can be explained as semantics, it is the macro differences that add to the confusion. For some analysts, Operation Gibraltar launched by Pakistan in 1965 in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is asymmetric,[6] while others consider it a conventional war.[7]

At the other end of the spectrum is the view that since national security includes economic, environmental, informational and cultural security, threats to a nation in these areas should also be included in the ambit of asymmetric threats. The argument is persuasive, as in the South Asian region, India, for a host of reasons, is particularly susceptible to such threats. In its January 2008 report, the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) stated that South Asia is a hot spot due to special ecological, demographic and socio-economic features. The

forecast of climate change includ: a rise in sea level threatening the densely populated Ganges delta, changes in the monsoon pattern affecting agriculture, tropical cyclones and melting of glaciers in the Himalayas.[8] Recently, it was reported in the media that 75 million Bangladeshi refugees may inundate India due to global warming.[9] While the horrific consequences of climate change are understood, it is perhaps stretching a point to include a variable such as nature while discussing asymmetric threats in matters military!

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Some thinkers are inclined to ascribe a number of distinctive features that mark asymmetric threats as, for example, that asymmetric threats will be unusual; irregular; would not have been catered for in the defender's plan; will not follow any pattern; will be designed to work around or negate the defender's strengths; and will be leveraged against military as well as civil targets. A dispassionate examination would perhaps indicate to professional soldiers that a similar list can be prepared for conventional battlefield operations as well. Indeed, the characteristics of asymmetric operations of Gen Giap against the French differed considerably from Pakistan's misadventure in Kargil. It can, however, be stated with a fair degree of certainty that asymmetric conflicts are almost always covert, at least in the initial phases, and surprise is the favoured principle. Asymmetric conflicts may also at times be launched to preempt changes in the domestic power structure or be generated by misrule within the country, leading to insurgency. International terrorism and religious fundamentalism by non-state actors have, of course, brought a new dimension altogether to the phenomenon of asymmetric threats.

No set conditions need be prescribed for a powerful nation to initiate its military into action — the wolf and lamb of Aesop's fable illustrate this best. The stronger power may deliberately raise the ante by false claims, mischievous propaganda and by continuous pin-pricks, including increased surveillance, aggressive patrolling, intrusions and troop build-up, and by stage managing incidents. Having been provoked, the weaker power may act rashly and present a *fait accompli* which would then invite a swift retribution from the stronger nation with little risk of condemnation from the world at large. The Sino-Indian conflict of 1962 is an apt illustration of the foregoing. The use of special forces

for a specific surgical operation by a stronger power could also be termed as asymmetric for the risk of failure in using a handful of men for a politically significant operation is indeed high. Otto Skorzeny's raid in the Gran Sasso Mountains in Italy to rescue Mussolini, the raid at Entebbe by the Israelis, employment of special operation forces (SOF) by the USA in Grenada, Somalia and Iran, and the use of the Spetsnaz in a raid in Kabul by the Soviet Union could, therefore, possibly qualify as asymmetric operations. Incidentally, many such lightning operations — for example, Operation Eagle's Claw of the US SOF in Iran — fail to achieve their objective.

For the weaker nations, however, to undertake an asymmetric operation, some conditions are prescribed and these can be postulated.[10] Foremost among these is that there should be a serious conflict of interest (political or ideological) between the two states as, for example, Kashmir between India and Pakistan. It needs to be emphasised that the conflict of interest must be substantive. This bone of contention gets a value addition if, during the period of stalemate, the weaker state suffers a political and military setback. In our case, this had happened in 1971 when India liberated Bangladesh, inflicting a crushing defeat on Pakistan. The intensity of infiltration from across the Line of Control (LoC), and terrorist activities showed a marked upswing in the subsequent years. Later, Gen Zia initiated low intensity coflict (LIC)to inflict a thousand cuts – another form of asymmetric conflict. Secondly the weaker side must value higher the issue in dispute and should be dissatisfied with the current state of affairs. Although Pakistan's persistent attempts to wrest J&K from India in 1947, 1965, through LIC operations, and in 1999, failed, they are indicative of her resolve. More importantly, the weaker nation, in its perception, must tend to lose even more if the status quo is allowed to continue. Finally, a burning desire to settle scores and, thereby, restore national pride is a powerful catalyst. Such emotive issues can always make a nation or a group (insurgents or terrorists) act irrationally.

Normally, a belief held dearly by defence policy-makers and defence planners alike is that if a nation is militarily capable and economically strong, wars can be prevented by the strategy of deterrence. But there are proximate factors that spark war at a given point in time in a long standing conflict relationship between nation states as, for example, Pakistan's misadventure against India in 1965 and the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962. Thus, mere military superiority and industrial might is no guarantee that a weaker state will not take recourse to arms.[11] This is when the decision-makers of the weaker state perceive that they can achieve their limited objective in a short war. The key issues are sufficient motivation, limited objective and a short, sharp engagement.

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It is obvious that decision-makers of the concerned state make a detailed calculation of the cost of asymmetric war vis-à-vis the benefits accruing out of the military adventure. A number of variables can be mentioned that help factor asymmetric wars but perhaps the single most important variable is the politico-military strategy of the weaker nation. The weaker power is more likely to resort to a *fait accompli* / limited objective strategy by nibbling at territorial gains. After all, the defender is stronger and can call the aggressor's bluff, as India did in 1965 by opening the Lahore front. For obvious reasons, territorial gains in undeveloped regions make for better payoffs. They are difficult to decipher and contest in the absence of landmarks, proper survey and records. In some cases, forced migration can help to fudge facts. In fact, the decision-makers of the status quo power may ponder if it is worth the trouble to undertake punitive measures for a piece of land where not even a blade of grass grows!

Having broadly identified some conceptual aspects of asymmetric conflicts, the situation pertaining to South Asia vis-à-vis India can now be examined.

South Asia as a Region

Basically, a region can be defined on the basis of certain specific indicators. A set of countries in close geographical proximity can be categorised as a region when they share a commonality of national interests as, for example, the European Union. These interests could incorporate a whole gamut of social, economic, political, cultural, historical and other factors. However, these nations should be sufficiently enlightened so as to understand the significance of placing cooperation above conflict in the conduct of inter-state relations. Unfortunately, the South Asian region fails the test because there is no commonality of interest; such sentiments are absent amongst the South Asian states despite their sharing historical, cultural, social and economic factors. Myriad social, economic and political problems that seem endemic to most the South Asian states are present almost perennially. The performance of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) following its inception in 1985 has been lacklustre and underscores the point.

An Overview of the South Asian Milieu

India dominates the region in physical, strategic and economic terms. This is

borne out by landmass, population, natural resources, economic and military strength and other appurtenances of national power. The smaller states of South Asia appear to resist this perceived domination by seeking to draw extra-regional powers into the region to counter-balance India's weight in regional politics.[12] Not surprisingly, Pakistan was quick to illegally cede the Shaksgam region of J&K to China in order to earn an all weather friend. China is the most intrusive power in the South Asian region. China's unquestioned support to Pakistan and the Bangladesh-China Defence Pact of 2002 are examples of this. Of overriding importance to the region are the tension and wars—conventional and asymmetric — between India and Pakistan. The two nations have battled four times already. The refrain of the newly elected government of Pakistan remains Kashmir-centric. In addition, there is an ongoing proxy war in J&K, insurgencies in northeast India, and in Sindh and Balochistan in Pakisan.

Lopsided developments in South Asia have caused dissatisfaction with governments and encouraged dissent and militancy. The Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in Bihar, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in Assam, People's War Group (PWG) in Andhra Pradesh, Baloch movement in Pakistan and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka are examples of this phenomenon. The information revolution has generated a spiral of rising expectations in all citizens and the expectation of a better standard of life has extended now into the hinterland. The remarkable success of the Maoists in Nepal is as much due to the incompetence of Nepalese politicians as to the shrewd moves of the Maoists. It is a moot point whether the Maoists will persist with their claim over tracts of land in Kangra, Uttarakhand, Bihar and Darjeeling in India. Perhaps more germane to the issue is that the Maoists have well established links with the MCC, PWG and ULFA in India.

Internal conflicts will, therefore, continue to plague the South Asian region as these are motivated by ethno-political or communal-religious or socio-economic factors. Their roots lie in the domestic polity. Insurgencies in northeast India, the Chakmas in Bangladesh, the Tamil-Sinhala strife in Sri Lanka, the Mohajir-Sindhi struggle and Balochi struggle in Pakistan are examples of instability caused by poor governance. The expression of these instabilities has taken the form of insurgency movements and terrorist activities, often supported by other sovereign states. Recent reports indicate active support to the Babbar Khalsa International in Punjab, Canada and elsewhere by Pakistan. Instability in the region also causes illegal migration into India from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Growth of Islamic fundamentalism, including links with the Al Qaeda and various Islamic groups

of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, has been confirmed by various international agencies. It is abundantly clear from the foregoing that non-military asymmetric threats to national security in the South Asian region have shown an alarming increase over the years. These are aided in no small measure by the international phenomena of terrorism, fundamentalism, arms/ drugs smuggling, money laundering, organised crime and cross-border migration.

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Asymmetric Threats vis-à-vis India

The wide spectrum of asymmetric threats faced by India is truly mind boggling. To briefly recapitulate, post-independence, the Indian military has fought asymmetric wars on a number of occasions; the Indian military and paramilitary have been battling armed foreign militants in J&K for over two decades and insurgents in seven northeastern states for over four decades! The menace of Naxalites in 157 districts of 12 states in India continues to grow and terrorist organisations have shown an increased sophistication in their attacks on the innocent population. The big question is: why do the asymmetric threats to India continue to grow?

In the South Asian comity of nations, India links with Pakistan in the northwest, Bhutan and Nepal in the north, Bangladesh in the east, and the island territories of Sri Lanka and Maldives in the south. Of India's 28 constituent states, as many as 17 have borders abutting seven foreign nations. Some answers can be found in the attitude of our neighbours and some within. India is the largest country in South Asia. It is a vibrant but fledgling democracy which is at once a source of its strength and weakness. The population of all South Asian countries is less than one-half of India and India's gross national product (GNP) is more than twice the combined GNP of its South Asian neighbours.[13] Yet, due to various acts of omission and commission, it would appear that India's primacy in the South Asian region is suspect. For a variety of reasons, our self-image is at sharp variance with our neighbours. The situation has not been helped by the partisan and motivated acts of our neighbours. Pakistan shows hostility when India talks about Al Qaeda camps in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and reneges on its promise of dismantling terrorist camps. Bangladesh provides sanctuaries to the northeast militants, permits illegal migration to India through porous borders, exports terrorists to India's

hinterlands and denies India transit rights.[14] The Maoists in Nepal have openly sympathised with Indian Naxalites, apart from claiming portions of India as parts of Greater Nepal.

It is curious that despite never having flexed its muscles, India's attitude provokes suspicion and hostility in the neighbourhood. Quite possibly, some of the conditions enumerated earlier for weaker powers to undertake asymmetric conflicts continue to be met. India's minor disputes over territory like Kachaivaitu Islands with Sri Lanka, Kalapani with Nepal, Tin Bigha and New Moore Island with Bangladesh only add fuel to the fire. Possibly, in their perception, India's policy of bilateralism is an instrument of coercive diplomacy. As Pakistan lurches from one period of political uncertainty to another, military conflict with India remains a distinct possibility. Equally, Bangladesh, despite the present bonhomie, continues to givea free run to the Harkat-ul- Jehadi-Islam (HUJI) and likeminded organisations inimical to India. The spread of the Naxalite movement in 157 districts and the rise of insurgents in the northeast euphemistically termed as the "red corridor" is entirely of our own making. The main causes of this phenomenon are economic deprivation, a failure to meet local aspirations, and total insensitivity by the governing elite. Various organisations operating in the "red corridor" would have received a shot in the arm with the success of the Maoists in Nepal. The incidence of Naxalite attacks may increase, with covert aid from our neighbours.

Conclusion

South Asia will remain home to asymmetric forms of warfare. In the foreseeable future, India will continue to face a large range of asymmetric threats from its neighbouring states and from non- state actors as well. While the Indian military is geared up to meet the challenges of asymmetric wars, it is the systemic failure with regard to the internal security (IS) situation that needs urgent attention. The present tendency is to treat all asymmetric threats due to the IS problems purely as a law and order issue. Since law and order is a state subject, the problem is left to the genius of the concerned state, with the Centre providing battalions from Central Police Organisations (CPO), if asked. Over the years indifferent handling of the Naxalite problem by the states has only worsened the situation. Now even the much touted concept of Salwa Judum—of arming citizens to fight the Naxalites—in Chhattisgarh has been put on hold by the judiciary and a probe ordered to inquire into the alleged human rights violations.[15] Similarly, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs has now suggested measures to be adopted to check migration from Bangladesh

to prevent ingress by terrorists and to carry out deportation of illegal immigrants.[16] The government's decision to raise 300 battalions of the paramilitary forces to combat the Naxalites is an acknowledgement of the deteriorating IS situation.[17]

As discussed earlier in the conceptual aspects of asymmetric conflicts, mere increase in force levels alone will not deliver the goods. A coherent proactive policy needs to be evolved conjointly by all stakeholders. A long-term strategic analysis should be carried out to identify asymmetric threats in different areas of the country and counter-measures that are required to tackle them identified at length. With the sole exception of acts of terrorism by non-state actors, disturbances within a nation leading to IS problems are entirely of our own making. While asymmetric threats that emanate from outside our borders should continue to be handled by the military, as at present, asymmetric threats arising out of IS problems and terrorist activities should be tackled by the CPO. Only in extreme cases should the military be called to handle an IS situation. Finally, all the gains made by the CPO, paramilitary and the military against internal asymmetric threats will be transient if reforms and developmental issues are not tackled simultaneously.

Notes

1. TV Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War initiation by Weaker Powers*, p. 3.
2. R Shamasastry, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, Book VI, Chapter 2.
3. RK Bhonsle, *India's National Security* (Knowledge World), p. 96.
4. Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, "Deconstructing Asymmetric Warfare and Asymmetry in Warfare," *CLAWS Journal*, Winter 2007, p. 11.
5. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers.*
6. Ibid.
7. RK Bhonsle, *India's National Security* (Knowledge World), p. 95.
8. http://www.sspconline.org/BR_climatechange.asp; "Climate Change as a Security Risk-WBGU (German Advisory Council on Climate Change)," (London: Earthscan Publishers, January 2008).
9. *Hindustan Times*, March 25, 2008.
10. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*, p.16.
11. Ibid., p. 35.
12. Maj Gen D Banerji, ed., *Security in South Asia* (Manas Publications, 1999).
13. Rita Manchanda, "India" in Banerjee, ed., Ibid.
14. "Bangla Desh Illegal Immigration in India: Implications for National Security,"in AC Shukla and V Asthana, *Security in South Asia Trends and Directions*.

15. *Hindustan Times*, April 15, 2008.
16. *Hindustan Times*, April 21, 2008.
17. *Hindustan Times,* April 22, 2008.