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ASYMMETRY IN WAR – ABUSED AND OVERUSED

by/par Commander John F. Newton

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ABSTRACT

Asymmetric warfare is a topic of apparent importance in contemporary conflict studies. It is used to explain every conceivable disparity in force structures, tactics and methods between belligerents, and is applied at all levels of war. The term's contemporary use is a post-Cold war phenomenon. It gained acceptance when military writers took note of the unique circumstances created by the proliferation of WMD, increasingly dangerous terrorism, and U.S. military and economic dominance. However, this paper finds that the broad application of the term asymmetry and its exaggerated sense of importance weakens its utility and confuses its application to the detriment of traditional terms and concepts. Its mainly dominant reference to threats is a significant failing, as it tends to create threats in every observation of disparity between belligerents at the expense of exposing enemy strategy. By reflecting on the term's original post-Vietnam War meaning, this paper shows that asymmetry in conflict studies at one time had meaningful application at the strategic level of war. The term's original meaning was a warning to commanders that the reliance on military power and technology enablers does not guarantee victory. Manifestly weak actors can win, or dramatically influence, conflict outcomes by indirect means and through the strategic manipulation of the intangibles of war such as time, space and will. This paper asserts that by focusing our intellectual analysis on the strategic vulnerabilities of the strong state's political, social and military structures, we will be better situated to perceive the weak actor's strategy and aims, and in turn what enemy threats, real or perceived, are most dangerous and likely. However, this approach will necessitate that the term asymmetry be constrained in its use to refer to asymmetric war and the asymmetric strategies of the weak actor only.

ASYMMETRY IN WAR – ABUSED AND OVERUSED

"We live in a wondrous time in which the strong is weak because of his moral scruples and the weak grows strong because of his audacity."

Otto von Bismarck - 1890

Introduction

From 1937-1945, the Chinese fought a ruthless war of resistance against Japanese invaders. Key to China's eventual victory was the adoption of guerilla warfare that over time sapped the strength and will of their enemy to continue the war. The asymmetry in operational style between the belligerents was stark. On 18 February 1991, during the Gulf War, Iraqi sea mines neutralized two state of the art U.S. warships.[1] The asymmetries in cost and technology between mines and warships were considerable. On 11 September 2001, terrorists attacked the continental U.S., causing significant civilian casualties and enormous economic damage. The asymmetries in method and morality between terrorists and a western liberal democracy were unimaginably vast. However, exploiting weakness, striking with strength, using deception and surprise, and advantageously employing technology are simply timeless qualities of good strategy. What is often overlooked though, is the underlying strategic dynamic that develops when a weak actor enters into conflict with an economically and militarily superior enemy. This kind of asymmetry, also evident in the three examples cited above, is of interest to this essay.

In its simplest interpretation, asymmetric warfare can be taken to describe conflict in which the military capabilities or fighting techniques of the two belligerents lack symmetry, or in other

[1] Anthony Cordesman and A.L. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume IV, The Gulf War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 889. USS Tripoli struck what was probably a LUGM-145 moored 10 feet below the surface. This strike was followed later by USS Princeton's activation of a more modern Manta mine lying on the seabed, causing extensive structural and propulsion damage. The LUGM-145 was a pre-World War I designed, three-horned, chemical contact mine.

words, are mismatched. Yet conflict has rarely been symmetric as opponents have fought for differing aims, from differing cultural perspectives, using different tactics and capabilities, organized around differing functional structures, and suffering differently the effects of terrain and weather. Even when forces are nearly balanced, it is every commander's intent to create an advantageous asymmetry in battle to facilitate tactical victories and operational success. Despite these well-understood concepts, the use of the term "asymmetry" in war figuratively exploded as a topic of import in the late-nineties. It immediately earned recognition in U.S. military doctrine, a central role in western military thought, and spawned a veritable industry in military writing.[2]

A literature search demonstrates that contemporary reference to the term "asymmetric" is broad and unrestrained. "Asymmetric threats" relate to the gravest threats to national security such as weapons of mass destruction, and the smallest tactical applications like mines. As such, they transcend all levels of war. "Asymmetric war" describes unusual, unconventional, unexpected, unimaginable, unorthodox and unethical tactics and operations, physical and psychological effects. Reference to asymmetric strategies, approaches, battles, concepts, and enemies is commonplace. Most commonplace though, is the frequent reference to "asymmetric threats". Is it possible that the unrestrained development of definitions to explain the concept of asymmetry has diminished its utility to military studies and rendered the concept meaningless? As one group of authors pointed out, "the concept of asymmetric threats falls apart under the sheer weight of all that it tries to support and address."[3] It is increasingly evident that the term's utility has faded as it meaning has

[2] Naval War College, Newport RI, "Library Notes" vol. 32, no. 6. (April 2004); available from http://www.nwc.navy.mil/library/3publications/nwclibrarypublications/libnotes/libAsymmetricWarfare.htm.; Internet accessed 13 September 2004. This internet source lists articles and publications relating to "Asymmetric Warfare". Approximately 130 works are cited, 80% of them written in the 2001-2003 period.

[3] Steven Lambakis, James Kiras and Kristin Kolet, *Understanding Asymmetric Threats to the United States*. (National Institute for Public Policy. Fairfax, VA. September 2002), 39.

been interpreted across a breadth of application that is too broad, and which offers little improvement over more enduring concepts in conflict studies.[4]

This paper proposes that the continued use of the term "asymmetric" in conflict studies must be limited to narrow latitude of meaning, relevant only to the operational to strategic-level of war, and specifically, it should be utilized to describe the enemy's asymmetric strategy only. To support this thesis, the genesis of the term will be explored in order to show that the subject has lasting utility that predates the recent mono-polar global security environment. The drift of the term away from its origins after the end of the Cold War will be described to highlight the current confusion and limited utility that it now serves. Finally, the argument will be made for a strategic focus to enable an understanding of the enemy's potential "asymmetric strategy", from which the wide range of traditional enemy threats will accrue some value of probability.

Asymmetric Warfare – Historical Origin

Andrew Mack first coined the term "asymmetric warfare" in 1975 in an essay explaining the failure of the U.S. to secure victory in Vietnam despite its overwhelming economic and military superiority and despite being victorious in virtually all tactical engagements.[5] The asymmetry in the Vietnam War was a power asymmetry between the belligerents. The *asymmetric strategy* of the weak actor was the adoption of a guerilla warfare strategy. There were no particularly unique threats or capabilities that gave North Vietnam an advantage over the U.S.. By fighting a classic three-stage guerilla war in accordance with the tenets of Mao Tse-Tung, North Vietnam won a war

[4] Lambakis et al. "Understanding Asymmetric Threats to the United States". This reference is an example of an author who has voiced concern over problems of definition and application with the term asymmetric threats and asymmetric warfare. Read also S.J. Blank's "Rethinking Asymmetric Threats".
[5] Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1975): 175-200.

of attrition.[6] With the weak side fighting for a vital national interest, and the strong for something far less, endurance became the essence of the strategy. The endurance of insurgent forces indirectly fanned the flames of internal political and public dissent and wore away the will of the U.S. to sustain the struggle. Attrition, therefore, was not measured in casualties or suffering; it was measured in the attrition of the "will" of the American people to sustain the war effort. Clearly, Mack was making the point that asymmetric wars are a strategic phenomenon and that there were key lessons for the future. First, overwhelming military force on its own is insufficient to guarantee victory in war, being replaced instead by two principal factors, the relative conviction of each polity to the cause, and the quality of time. Second, weak states fight by the indirect strategy, striking at the strong state's moral fabric, that is, their will. Third, theatres are not constrained by state boundaries; weak states have global reach notwithstanding lacking the physical means to strike their enemy's homeland. Mack's work on asymmetric power imbalances and the nature of wars that arise was followed by an interesting study by T.V. Paul.

In 1994, Paul sought to explain how and why weak states chose to initiate war against stronger opponents.[7] Again, the asymmetry in the wars was a power disparity. In the six wars studied, the *asymmetric strategies* were consistently rapid and decisive operations with the objective to seize limited geographic aims, presenting the stronger foe with a *fait accompli*. A *fait accompli* is an "irreversible condition, which may not be altered following the conclusion of the war, although the defender may prefer maintenance of the condition prior to the war."[8] Secrecy, surprise, deception, mobility, and the possession of a capability advantage were essential elements

[6] Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung* (Foreign Languages Press, Peking. 1966), 159.
[7] Thaza Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker* States (University Press: Cambridge, 1994), 250. Paul examines six wars: Japan-Russia, 1904; Japan-U.S., 1941; China-Korea, 1950; Pakistan-India, 1965; Egypt-Israel, 1973; and Argentina-U.K., 1982.
[8] *Ibid*., 21.

of the weaker state's strategies.[9] Equally important, the strong actors had overconfidence in the deterrence effect of their military superiority, to the extent that not even their nuclear weapons (Israel and the U.K.) could deter aggression by the weak state (Egypt and Argentina). In each successful case, the weak power had a compelling strategic intent; a vital national interest emboldened them to resort to war. Where victory or brokered settlement was achieved, the weak actor had succeeded in engaging a manifestly superior enemy, in the face of stiff deterrence factors, and without losing out entirely in the conflict (Pakistan, Egypt).[10] In other cases, the weak states' suffered unintended consequences, misjudging the vital national interests of their enemy and invoking their full retribution (Japan and Argentina).

Both Mack and Paul saw asymmetry in war as a power imbalance. For the weak state to successfully engage their enemy demanded a clear *asymmetric strategy* comprising an indirect attack against the "will" of their opponent. Mastery of the operational art was paramount, and while short-term tactical advantages and unconventional tactics were elements of the conflicts analyzed, weaponry and threats were secondary in the strategic calculus. Related to this observation, deterrence factors built on military superiority failed the strong actor. These wars were high-risk for the weak actor; national and political survival was at stake if their aims failed. Nonetheless, the

[9] *Ibid*., 250. Paul assesses the influence of advanced military capabilities in each study, including: Japan-the Type 91 aerial torpedo; Pakistan-U.S. military hardware; Egypt-Russian hardware; and Argentina-Exocet missiles.

[10] Pakistan initiated the1965 war against superior Indian forces due to alarm over India's efforts to integrate Kashmir. The war ended in a stalemate with approximately equal losses and the restoration of pre-war boundaries by a USSR-brokered peace. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Egypt went to war to force Israel's withdrawal eastward away from the Suez canal and return vast areas of land and oilfields in the Sinai. Although, Israel counterattacked to the west bank of the canal, the victory went to Egypt when the USSR and the UN intervened. In the ensuing peace, Egypt regained the east bank of the canal and lands further east including the strategic Gidi and Mitla Passes. Finally, in 1978 the US-brokered Camp David Accords saw Egypt regain the Sinai territory in full. While Israel won a military victory in 1973, their political losses were large, requiring direct U.S. war aid, and costing Israel its self-confidence in its military superiority over its Arab enemy.

point here is clear, weak states are not deprived of options in military conflicts with militarily superior enemies.

The theory that weak states can defeat militarily and economically dominant opponents is borne out by more than just a handful of studies. Arreguin-Toft analyzed 197 wars of the past 200 years where a weak actor was pitted against a strong foe.[11] He observed that in the past 50 years (1950-1998), weak actors were victorious in 55% of the conflicts. Such a distorted outcome suggests that a clear *asymmetric strategic* effect is at play that can handicap a stronger power.[12] Thus, the early works on "asymmetric warfare" by Mack and Paul seeded the literature with an important aspect of conflict study involving weak states at war. Despite these important studies, it would take a convergence of events for the term "asymmetric war" to gain a position of notoriety in conflict theory.

The end of the Cold War was one of those events. The bipolar world dominated by the s*ymmetric,* superpower military and economic contest was suddenly terminated. Numerous long-standing regional instabilities emerged from the umbrella of superpower influence and deterrence processes. At the very moment that advanced technological applications were coming to fruition in the U.S., the great superpower conventional armies no longer looked to each other as their principal preoccupation.

[11] Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (Summer 2001) 97. The author uses the term actors to mean states or coalitions of states and includes conflicts where governments are engaged in operations against rebel forces. A conflict is considered if it results in over 1000 battle deaths per year on average.
[12] *Ibid.*, 122. Mao-style indirect approach (Chinese, Algerian, Vietminh, Malayan and Mujahideen insurgencies for example) and Blitzkrieg-style direct warfare approaches are compared in various asymmetric wars. Arreguin-Toft contends that it is the type of strategic interactions (barbarism, guerilla warfare, direct attack etc) that decides the outcome in an asymmetric war and is not necessarily a measure of the weak power's will.

Operation Desert Storm was the second event. The sudden collapse of the Iraqi army in 1991 when confronted by superior coalition forces was strategic theater viewed worldwide. Although an unbalanced contest from the outset, the Iraqi defensive strategy played to the American strengths of manoeuvre and force-on-force battle. The *American Way of War* consummated the marriage between modern manoeuvre doctrine and technology enablers including precision-guided munitions, lethality, information dominance and rapid mobility. Surely, no rational weak state would miscalculate politics to the degree that would necessitate openly pitting their armed forces against superior U.S.-led coalitions on such a scale again. Without a peer competitor, future wars involving the U.S. would, for the foreseeable future, be asymmetrical from a military and economic power point of view. Given the unparalleled military dominance of the U.S., the revolution in military affairs, and the inevitable engagement of the U.S. in humanitarian, peace support, and other low-intensity conflicts, military planners began to postulate that the nature of conflicts from a U.S. perspective was changing.[13]

Other political and military forces at play in the early 1990's aided the rebirth of the term asymmetric war. The end of the Cold War facilitated arms control and disarmament treaties that saw initially good progress in reducing superpower nuclear arsenals, the expansion of non-proliferation regimes, bans on chemical and biological weapons, and negotiation of a nuclear test ban treaty. Iraq's nuclear and ballistic missile capability was dismantled through international sanctions. Other states voluntarily rolled back nuclear programs, returned ex-Soviet nuclear

[13] United States, Department of Defence, *National Security Strategy 1995*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), 3. The report asserts "ongoing efforts to obtain such weapons (WMD) by a number of countries present great and growing risks for the United States and its allies. The continuing diffusion of missile delivery technology is increasing the risks we face. Even the prospect of a hostile regional power or terrorist group gaining access to nuclear, chemical or biological weapons contributes to regional insecurities and increases the difficulty of settling disputes peacefully."

capabilities, or froze their nuclear programs (North Korea).[14] However, progress in dismantling Russia's WMD diminished as that state lost international political leverage and economic collapse deepened. By the mid-nineties, it was evident that non-proliferation efforts were simply too little too late. In 1998, Pakistan, India, Iran and North Korea tested medium range ballistic missiles while India and Pakistan conducted their first nuclear detonations. It was also learned that Russia had maintained an ambitious biological warfare program despite the end of the Cold War.[15] The conclusion drawn was that multi-lateral non-proliferation efforts were helpful, but were simply not enough. The number of countries capable of obtaining, and trading in WMD and missile delivery systems was growing. The specter of terrorists obtaining WMD on the international black market and their use against the U.S. could no longer be ruled out.[16]

In 1996, the U.S. Strategic Assessment employed the term asymmetry as follows: "asymmetrical interests are present in many, if not all, regional conflicts. A regional regime might be convinced that its survival is at stake, while the U.S. interest in the conflict might well fall far short of that. A regime making such an assumption might gamble that Washington's stakes in the conflict would not be high enough to warrant a U.S. nuclear response to the regime's NBC use (especially if limited)".[17] This application of the term asymmetric was novel. It described differing

[14] Institute for National and Strategic Studies, *Strategic Assessment 1999*. (Washington D.C.: National Defense University, 1999), 294. Countries such as South Africa, Brazil and Argentina rolled back their nuclear programs, while Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan returned ex-Soviet nuclear weapons to Russia.
[15] *Ibid*. 295.
[16] Institute for National and Strategic Studies, *Strategic Assessment 1995*, (Washington D.C.: National Defense University, 1995), 115. Available from http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Strategic%20Assessments/sa95/sach09co.html; Internet; accessed 16 September 2004. This report is an early mention of the link between WMD proliferation and threats to the continental U.S.. This realization developed in the wake of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing that killed three and injured thousands.
[17] Institute for National and Strategic Studies, *Strategic Assessment 1996*, (Washington D.C.: National Defense University, 1996), Available from http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Strategic%20Assessments/sa96/sa96ch16.html#subhead1; Internet; accessed 16 September 2004. Chapter 1. This report concluded "with regard to relations among the major powers--which have historically been the main element in world politics--the long superpower confrontation during the Cold War is being replaced by a world of asymmetrical poles in which one (the U.S.) is much the strongest."

strategic interests between the U.S. and other regional powers, and did not relate to a power asymmetry as Mack or Paul had originally conceived it. The reference was interesting nonetheless for it made note of the fact that the U.S. could no longer rely on its traditional political and military elements of deterrence to thwart aggression from the many weak states with regional interests. Nor could those traditional deterrence capabilities deter transnational terrorism, the scale, scope and frequency of which were increasing dramatically throughout the nineties.[18]

Clearly, U.S. strategic thought had begun to focus on the impact of the country's newfound position as the sole superpower and the implications of its power asymmetry. It was the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) that finally gave international recognition to the term "asymmetry" in war:

> U.S. dominance in the conventional military arena may encourage adversaries to use such asymmetric means to attack our forces and interests overseas and Americans at home. That is, they are likely to seek advantage over the United States by using unconventional approaches to *circumvent* or *undermine* our strengths while *exploiting* our vulnerabilities. Strategically, an aggressor may seek to avoid direct military confrontation with the United States, using instead means such as terrorism, NBC threats, information warfare, or environmental sabotage to achieve its goals. If, however, an adversary ultimately faces a conventional war with the United States, it could also employ asymmetric means to delay or deny access to critical facilities; disrupt our command, control, communications, and intelligence networks; deter allies and potential coalition partners from supporting U.S. intervention; or inflict higher than expected U.S. casualties in an attempt to weaken our national resolve.[19]

In this regard, use of the term "asymmetric" is clearly related to a situation resulting from a power imbalance between the U.S. and weaker adversaries. However, specific use of the term is related to "asymmetric means", in other words, threats such as WMD, information warfare and other

[18] 1984-Marine Corps barracks Beirut, 1988-PanAm Flight 103 bombing, 1993-World Trade Center bombing, 1995-Tokyo subway Sarin attacks, 1995-Federal Building Oklahoma City bombing, 1996-Sri Lanka Central Bank bombing, 1996- Riyadh Khobar Towers bombing, 1998-Nairobi and Tanzania U.S. embassy bombings, 2000-USS Cole bombing, 2001-World Trade Center attacks

[19] Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 1997* (Washington, DC. 1997), Section II.

unconventional approaches that can circumvent and undermine the strengths of the strong power. This unique application of the term asymmetry was a clear departure from the term's historical roots. While a selected list of enemy strategic options was provided (delay, deny, disrupt, deter and inflict), the use of the term asymmetry was weighted to the consideration of "ways and means". The definition spawned a veritable industry in asymmetric writings, but in doing so, the essential link between strategy (delay, deny, disrupt, deter etc.) and the tactics (doctrine, operations, threats, technology etc) necessary to support the strategy was lost. "Asymmetric threats" became a main focus of analytical effort as military writers began examination of the nature of asymmetric war in the late nineties.

Asymmetric Threats – Abused and Overused

The idea that there are latent threats capable of *attacking U.S. forces and interests overseas and Americans at home* consumed many contemporary authors. The study of the asymmetric dilemma tended to mirror the western military establishment's preoccupation with technology enablers and advanced capabilities, looking first and foremost at potential areas for enemies to adopt and adapt technologies capable of thwarting U.S. military dominance. Thus, potential asymmetries between belligerents were dissected time and again into their component parts to determine where a weaker enemy may find its preferred battle-space. Metz and Johnson provided what is probably the most thorough analysis of asymmetry by deconstructing it into its many components, a sort of shopping list of asymmetric potentials.[20] They framed their analysis by recognizing positive and negative asymmetry, the latter being of real interest as it relates to the weak actor's exploitation of capabilities against enemy vulnerabilities. They then described the

[20] Steven Metz and Douglas V. Johnson, *Asymmetry and U.S. Military Strategy: Definition, Background, and Strategic Consequences,* Special Report of the Strategic Studies Institute (U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA. 2001), 6.

various *dimensions* of asymmetry, including short and long-term asymmetry; the Blitzkrieg and Maoist People's War being cases in point respectively. They saw asymmetry as being deliberate (9/11 terrorist strikes) or by default (Battle of Mogadishu 1993), the result of unintended consequences so to speak. It could be material or psychological, low or high risk. Most interesting though, they categorized asymmetry into its various *forms* including asymmetries in method and technology, normative asymmetries and asymmetries in will, and asymmetries in organization and time.[21] Other authors have analyzed these forms but for the sake of illustration, Metz and Johnson's six forms serve the purpose of illustrating how asymmetry in war has been used to describe every potential difference between two belligerents.[22]

- An asymmetry of *method* can relate to the enemy's employment of a form of warfare fundamentally different from the U.S. way, such as non-linear operations favoured by guerilla forces. Operating dispersed, lightly armed, mobile, striking where the enemy is not strong, blending into civilian populations, and disappearing into terrain features such as mountains, jungles or urban settings, for example, are the hallmark of the guerilla.

- An asymmetry of technology relates to the introduction, or improvisation of, new or existing military capabilities. This issue is particularly worrisome for the U.S. Despite massive spending on technology research and development, it finds itself constantly undermined by open source literature, espionage, dual-use technologies, and international arms trade that obviates decades of expensive R&D for weak states. Various WMD and related missile

[21] *Ibid*., 10.
[22] Robert M. Cassidy, "Why Great Powers Fight Small Wars Badly," *Military Review* (September-October 2000): 41-53 and J.G. Eaton. "The Beauty of Asymmetry: An Examination of the Context and Practice of Asymmetric and Unconventional Warfare from a Western/Centrist Perspective," *Defence Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 51-82. These reports describe various asymmetries similar to that categorized by Metz and Johnson's asymmetric forms.

delivery systems top the list of asymmetric threats of this genre. Moreover, many older capabilities retain significant operational import and are frequently considered in this category. These weapons include rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), mines, man portable anti-air missiles, high-speed civilian-pattern boats, and improvised explosive devices. Finally, novel adaptation of capabilities to new roles such as the employment of RPGs in an anti-air role, and remote detonation methods using cellular phone communications belongs in this category.

Iran is an example of a nation developing a cost effective maritime access denial force that highlights an asymmetry of technology against a more powerful maritime nation. Its littoral capability comprises copious quantities of sea mines, and numerous high-speed craft including civilian and military patterns, armed with missiles and torpedoes. A mix of modern high-end technologies readily available on the international arms market including diesel-electric submarines and anti-ship cruise missiles stiffen the defences. This force and its command, control and surveillance components presents a formidable asymmetric anti-access threat capable of closing the Straits of Hormuz against an invading power.[23]

- An asymmetry of will develops when one antagonist is fighting for a vital interest such as national, tribal, ethnic or religious survival while the other is protecting or promoting a less-than vital interest. Those fighting for their existence are likely to be committed in total to the effort notwithstanding the degree of suffering and hardship that must be borne. According to Metz and Johnson, "an asymmetry of will allows the antagonist with the higher stake to

[23] GlobalSecurity.org, "Iran's Navy," http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/navy.htm; Internet; accessed 20 September 2004.

bear greater costs, accept greater risk, and undertake actions which the less committed antagonist might eschew on moral or legal grounds."[24] Arab guerrillas called *fedayeen*, literally "*the sacrificers*", understand the importance of cost-tolerance in war. "Will" is the sum of many parts, not just an acceptance of casualties and suffering. It also represents the ability of a state to bear the costs of resources diverted from other national requirements, the costs of inflation and economic retardation, the cost to alliance cohesion, the costs of social dissolution and political disintegration, and the loss of common interests (if any) with the opponent.[25]

- Normative asymmetry develops when the belligerents apply different ethical and legal standards in their application of power. Suicide attacks, effects causing mass civilian casualties, hostage taking, human shields, torture and abuse of prisoners, child soldiers, sheltering in cultural monuments, eschewing uniforms and mingling with civilians, and employing WMD are examples of normative asymmetries. Asymmetry is heightened when strong actors, "such as superpowers - are held to a higher moral standard and thus penalized much more severely, in terms of legitimacy, when they injure or detain non-combatants and civilians."[26] Exploiting normative asymmetries may induce significant shock and terror in civilian populations, a sense of helplessness and isolation, and loss of confidence in the government responsible for their protection.

[24] Metz and Johnson, "Asymmetry and U.S. Military Strategy: Definition, Background and Strategic Concepts"…, 10.
[25].Steven Rosen, "War Power and the Willingness to Suffer," in *Peace War and Numbers* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 1972), 173.
[26] Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars"…, 13. This is also referred to as the CNN effect.

- Asymmetries in organization exist when a belligerent develops formations or organizational structures to influence favorably the outcome of battle. Examples of organizational asymmetries include World War II submarine wolf packs, the Roman phalanx, or Napoleon's mutually supporting corps. In the future, insurgent and terrorist organizations may eschew hierarchical constructs in favour of cellular networks of semi-independent small units.[27]

- Asymmetries in time refer to the degree to which the belligerents can withstand a long conflict, or execute a lightening campaign of limited aims. Short wars are economically and politically advantageous for western nations; long wars are prohibitively expensive and sap their will. Strong powers will seek to terminate the conflict quickly with overwhelming military force. The weak actor may seek to delay, disperse and draw the conflict out, incrementally increasing the cost and casualties. Time is often an essential element of the weak actor's strategy. Mao Tse-Tung wrote, "Japan's economy will crack under the strain of China's long resistance and the morale of the Japanese forces will break under the trial of innumerable battles."[28]

There are two problems with an approach that identifies asymmetries within the various physical and psychological domains of an enemy's warfare effort. First, this process fuelled the tendency for all qualitative and quantitative dissimilarities to be labeled as asymmetric. Consequently, they contributed directly to the divorce of asymmetric warfare from its roots as a conflict descriptor that highlights a military power imbalance in general with overarching strategic

[27] Metz and Johnson, "Asymmetry and U.S. Military Strategy: Definition, Background and Strategic Concepts"…, 11.
[28] Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*…, 262.

significance. The asymmetries described above are, for the most part, traditional expressions of enemy characteristics, capabilities, strengths, organization, motivation to name but a few. They have a distinctly tactical emphasis and in most categories speak to ways and means, not strategy. Most are the standard elements of current western intelligence collection and analysis efforts and by simply labeling them asymmetric has done little to contribute to an understanding of the asymmetric conflict dynamic.[29]

Secondly, by classifying the various physical and psychological disparities between belligerents as asymmetric, the tendency has been for every dissimilarity to assume asymmetric qualities in the eyes of the strong actor. This is particularly true in the quest to label capability disparities as asymmetric threats. Weapons, tactics, abhorrent conduct, fanaticism and organizational constructs in themselves do not win wars. As S. Blank points out, "to emphasize threats over strategies or operational concepts deprives commanders of the incentive and opportunity to focus on strategic and, or operational level asymmetries from which the threats may then flow."[30] That is to say, the focus on so-called asymmetric threats fails to illuminate the larger phenomena of what the weak actor is seeking to achieve and leads us away from the necessary job of considering what threats are probable from the many that can be envisaged. Probability can be deduced from several factors. Foremost is the deduction of potential enemy strategies, and then working downwards to potential threats and tactics. For example, a search for the enemy's overarching "asymmetric strategy" necessitates consideration of own force vulnerabilities, from

[29] Melissa Applegate, *Preparing for Asymmetry: As Seen Through the Lens of Joint Vision 2020*, Report of the Strategic Studies Institute (Carlisle PA: U.S. Army War College, 2001), 14. Applegate expresses frustration with Joint Vision 2020 and the issue of probability regarding asymmetric threats; the focus on asymmetric threats "tends to look at the capabilities and actions themselves, and not the nature of the problem…Existing focus on most dangerous threats - real, perceived, potential, or theoretical - produces a fundamental challenge to operational forces and intelligence tasked with dealing on a daily basis with less dangerous, more likely frustrating challenges."

[30] Stephen J. Blank, *Rethinking Asymmetric Threats*, Report of the Strategic Studies Institute (Carlisle PA: U.S. Army War College, 2003), 8.

which targets may be perceived, which in turn illuminates likely enemy tactics and threats. From this top-down process, valuable force protection and interdiction efforts can be concentrated and appropriate deterrence effects focused against most dangerous and likely threats.

Regrettably, the nuance between threat and strategy is subtle, and the path of least resistance for many writers is to focus on the easier concept of seeing asymmetry as being threat-oriented, driving the asymmetric concept down to a tactical-level analysis, broadening the concept's meaning and weakening its utility. The degree to which a focus on asymmetric threats has failed to serve useful purpose is highlighted below.

In a military essay describing an incident during Operation Iraqi Freedom, R.M. Cassidy describes contact between 32 U.S. Apache helicopters and the Iraqi Medina Division near Najaf.[31] The clash damaged 90 percent of the attacking helicopters, and led to the capture of two flight crew. It was an aerial ambush, reportedly cued by a cellular phone call from a forward observer, and utilizing an unusual tactic of turning off the city's electricity to signal the commencement of the ambush.[32] Cassidy asserts that the Iraqis employed asymmetric tactics that "were anathema to the U.S. definition of war."[33] The use of phones, electricity, Maoist-style guerilla hit-and-run tactics, and dispersion constituted asymmetric tactics. However, these observations highlight nothing more than an adaptive enemy doing what he had to, with the technology and terrain conditions available, in order to forestall the advances of a stronger belligerent. These adaptations had limited consequence; U.S. forces adjusted tactics and rolled forward with little more than a doctrinal

[31] Robert M. Cassidy, "Renaissance of the Attack Helicopter in the Close Fight," *Military Review* 83, no. 4 (July-August 2003): 3.
[32] Richard J. Newman, "Ambush at Najaf," *Air Force Magazine* 86, no. 10 (October 2003) [journal on-line]; available from http://www.afa.org/magazine/oct2003/1003najaf.asp; Internet; accessed 22 September 2004.
[33] Cassidy, "Renaissance of the Attack Helicopter in the Close Fight"…,1.

aviation. At the time of writing, Cassidy was not reporting

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etween a manifestly weak actor and a strong state.[34] For

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are a low technology, defensive weapon of choice in the littoral battle-space. They are easy to lay, but difficult to locate and neutralize. Even the most advanced minesweeping capability cannot hurry the task of clearing more than a token area of water-space. Consequently, mines remain the anathema of modern navies operating in littoral waters and are quite capable of slowing naval entry into the littoral zone to the degree that they are often regarded as a serious anti-access strategy, an asymmetric response to U.S. theater entry.

By claiming that Iraqi mines represented an asymmetric threat is simply does nothing to illuminate the true nature of asymmetric strategies. The Iraqi mines were laid relatively close inshore to thwart local amphibious landings. For various reasons, but not solely the result of minefields, the risk of conducting an amphibious assault was not warranted given the planned scheme of manoeuvre and the overpowering buildup of coalition forces ashore. To claim a threat is asymmetric because it potentially can delay or deny U.S. theater entry demands that planners see the problem with a broader view of strategic effects. In this case, the analysis must examine if Iraq was able to deploy its mines and other threats in a distant operating area such as the Straits of Hormuz. Perhaps then, the mines might have had a significant effect on the flow of shipping to the Gulf. Planners would also want to consider if Iraq could have orchestrated by any political or military means the involvement of Iran in the conflict, and by this means bring to bear that state's formidable layered sea denial capability to close the straits. Similarly, could Iraq foment civil unrest in Egypt or Israel to the point that the Egypt was coerced into denying the canal's use to coalition militaries? Perhaps then, a true asymmetric, anti-access strategy could be perceived. The simple employment of mines in itself does not invoke the concepts of asymmetric war and simply serves to degrade the true significance of this unique conflict concept.

Approaching the asymmetric concept from a bottom-up, tactical and threat-based analysis adds little to the strategic phenomena of weak actors defeating strong powers. However, a vulnerability analysis of the strong power's moral and physical capabilities does provide some degree of clarity and helps to elevate the asymmetric concept to its rightful place as a strategic concept.

A Vulnerability Approach – Towards a Better Definition

R.W. Barnett undertook a detailed assessment of asymmetric warfare in 2003.[38] His frank assessment was aimed at the numerous constraints that hobble western liberal societies in the conduct of war, in particular those that are specific to the U.S.. While this approach is similar to Metz and Johnson in description of normative asymmetry, Barnett's approach paints the picture from the perspective of the strong, liberal democratic power and not from the weak state's perspective. Barnett exposes vulnerabilities in the strong power's social, political and military systems, and in do1/Tt, ank state's

interests only), weapon limitations (landmines, cluster bombs, napalm etc.), restrictive rules of engagement, a fixation on precision targeting, limitations on collateral damage and casualty aversion, the free press, civilian control of the military, and government decision making processes constitute some constraints.

While western military systems have focused their developmental efforts in the domains of weapons, logistic systems, and manpower, they have suffered the braking effects on the application of power by Barnett's constraints. When taken as a whole, these constraints may provide the battle-space for the weak actor. From the insurgent, terrorist or weak state's point of view, where their very survival is at stake, these constraints must be eschewed to open the battle-space where their inferior physical but stronger moral forces can be employed. Barbarism, guerilla warfare, terrorism, and rude surprises from new or adapted technologies have been the staple of conflicts since the beginning of time. Add to this mix WMD and super-terrorism and the unspeakable means available to a weak state becomes frightening. As Katzenbach points out: "presumably, it is axiomatic that in war, as differentiated from sport, one never fights on the enemy's terms."[39] It is this collision of constraint and unlimited means that leads Barnett to conclude that true asymmetries "are those actions that an adversary can exercise that you either cannot or will not."[40] More importantly in my opinion though, these constraints open up the avenue for the enemy to exploit a successful asymmetric strategy.

Barnett's arguments very much relate to the political and military strategic aspects of a conflict. His study is not about threats and tactics, but is a revealing analysis of how U.S., and to a

[39] E.L. Katzenbach Jr., "Time, Space, and Will: The Politico-Military Views of Mao-Tse-tung," in *The Guerilla – and How to Fight Him* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1962), 14.
[40] Barnett, A*symmetrical Warfare: Today's Challenges to U.S. Military Power*…, 15.

large extent western, strategic intent can be influenced and defeated. The vulnerabilities are easy to discern given the transparency of western society and its decision-making processes. For a weak actor, media commentary, analysis, polls, and the degree to which certain subjects are examined in the media provide the near-real-time intelligence and analysis of the vulnerabilities against which a weak adversary can build a strategy and campaign, and against which various threats in his inventory can be targeted in a coordinated fashion. In observing upon asymmetry as a study of constraints, Barnett has successfully elevated the concept of asymmetric war to a strategic-level concept.

Barnett's constraints are not the only vulnerabilities of strategic consequence. There are many others: limitations concerning the conventional concepts of nuclear deterrence, strategic-level access denial strategies, alliance cohesion weaknesses, domestic internal vulnerabilities of an open society, vulnerabilities in free flow of trade and financial transactions upon which stable economies depend, single points of vulnerability in command and control and space-based communications systems are examples. Finally, as Blank points out, "since enemies are inherently asymmetric, extremely so in the case of an enemy like al-Qaida, they present not just inherent asymmetries of strategies, operations and tactics, but also present immense cognitive barriers to understanding which no technology can fully erase."[41] That is to say, we suffer a cognitive vulnerability that short-circuits our very ability to perceive how our vulnerabilities might be the focus of an enemy strategy and in turn what threats we may be subjected to. Cumulatively, these vulnerabilities are strategic in nature and in most cases require considerable domestic and international diplomatic cooperation in their defence. They also demand defence planning that goes well beyond what defence agencies and military staffs can accomplish on their own. The gravity of these strategic

[41] Blank, *Rethinking Asymmetric Threats*…, 22

vulnerabilities demands that this is where the definitions and applications of asymmetry in war should be focused.

The Unique Case of WMD and Terrorism

From the foregoing it has been argued that the concept of asymmetry in war must be focused on asymmetric strategies. The case of WMD and transnational terrorism, though, present unique cases where the threat is so grave that they are a strategy in their own right. These types of strategic threats have the potential to inflict truly strategic loss or outcomes on the strong power, and would likely cause a disproportionate effect on the strong power's ability to sustain operations.

The tendency though is to default automatically to categorizing WMD and terrorism as asymmetric threats. The point being made here is that the term asymmetric threats must be abandoned totally to permit planners and commanders the full clarity to see strategy as the underlying motivating force in an asymmetric contest. The weak power seeks an effect such as Mogadishu, not a Pearl Harbor. The latter would likely raise the strong power's interest in the conflict to a vital level and upset the delicate balance that gives the weak power its battle-space in a situation of significant power imbalance. By threatening to use, or using WMD against a strong state's homeland, or employing them regionally as a tactical weapon, the weak power has entered into a complex domain of strategy where the strong power may or may not be constrained in retaliatory response, and where the deterrence effects of nuclear weapons may or may not be effective. These complex relationships were evident in the first Gulf War when Saddam Hussein chose not to employ his WMD, a reluctance that may have had its roots in the overt threat from the U.S. to retaliate in kind with nuclear weapons. These complex relationships are also evident in

Pakistan where the country's historical sponsorship of terrorism directed at India in the Kashmir is backed by a WMD counter-threat to Indian overreaction. Therefore, WMD is a significant strategic threat, but remains an integral part of a strategy. Like mines, simply possessing WMD capability does not make a strategy asymmetric.

By this logic too, transnational terrorism is a clear strategic threat. When the underlying motive has at its roots, passive or active state sponsorship, the strategic threat becomes part of an asymmetric strategy. When terrorism is employed or manipulated to disrupt alliances, deter engagement, deny or delay access, or destroy major elements of military offensive capability, then an asymmetric strategy has been adopted by the terrorist force. Terrorist attacks such as that in 1984 against the Beirut Marine barracks, the 2000 attack on the USS Cole, and terrorist forces involved in insurgencies and regional destabilizing activities may, if collectively coordinated, represent an asymmetric strategy aimed at disrupting coalition military campaigns and the regional stability that these campaigns generally require for secure rear areas and lines of communication. An example of a coordinated terrorist asymmetric strategy might have been active in the 13 December 2001 attacks on the Indian parliament that sent India and Pakistan to the brink of war. It is not inconceivable that Al-Qaida manipulated regional power relationships by undertaking the attack and opening a second front in Pakistan in an attempt to distract and disrupt concurrent U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan.[42] The potential ability of terrorist organizations to manipulate politics and influence military operations through coherent strategies must be the primary focus of foreign affairs and military planners. By searching for enemy strategic intent or potential regional effects that terrorism could influence, the interception of seemingly isolated intelligence hits might

[42] Blank, *Rethinking Asymmetric Threats*…, 41.

expose dangerous enemy action plans against which interdiction and force protection efforts could be focused.

The underlying argument of this paper is not upset by the existence of ever-more draconian threats that in themselves have considerable destructive and debilitating potential. Their existence will always necessitate a considerable and constant defensive posture and expensive force protection outlay. However, their threat of employment in conflict scenarios where a significant power asymmetry exists, will require our constant search for the underlying asymmetric strategy from which the most likely and dangerous conventional and unconventional threats can be perceived and protected against.

Conclusion

It was not the aim of this paper to quote the endless derivations of the use of the term asymmetry in warfare studies since its popular conception in the late nineties. Nor was the aim to explore the relevance and significance of the ever-widening employment of the term to describe tactical, operational, and strategic asymmetries, or asymmetries in approaches, threats and enemies to name but a few. The aim was to demonstrate that the real place for the concept of asymmetry in conflict studies resides at the strategic level and nowhere else.

The invention of the term asymmetry in war predated its latest incarnation as a post-Cold War phenomenon of the late nineties. Its early usage was simplistic and referred to the power asymmetry between the co-belligerents in the conflict. Equally simple, the warfare concepts resulting from asymmetry were neither revolutionary nor unexplained by long-standing conflict

theories. However, the fact that weak powers can be victorious in war against manifestly superior foes demands coherent strategy on the part of the weak state by which threats and unique capabilities can be focused. While the risks to the weak actor are very high in these circumstances, certain factors provide the weak actor a battle-space within which to operate. Apparent deterrence factors are not necessarily effective as the threat from the weak state does not threaten the strong power's vital interests to the degree that would warrant the employment of the deterrent force. The fact that superior military power can be defeated speaks to the overwhelming impact of the moral forces and indirect strategies in war. The strategy of the weak power is aimed at defeating the enemy's will to underwrite the conflict with casualties, cost and damage to the country's value system. These qualities of war are timeless and should stand as a warning that dominant military powers can be soundly defeated notwithstanding their technology and capability advantages.

Did something change during the transition from a bipolar world dominated by the superpowers to the post-Cold War era dominated by the U.S. alone? The proliferation of WMD and the increase in transnational terrorism are marked changes in the international security situation and immediately raise doubts that traditional deterrence forces have much impact on the many weak states searching for new regional security balances as the protective umbrella of the superpowers was shed. The revolution in military affairs and the increasingly dominant position of the U.S. economic power in itself was insufficient to contain the new outgrowth of threats; in fact the opposite effect has seemingly occurred. The explosion of writings on asymmetry in war is testimony to the confusion in military studies as authors' attempt to fill the void left by deterrence and superpower conflict calming with the principles of asymmetric war. Where do asymmetries exist, how can they be categorized, deconstructed and defended against? Regrettably, this process

led to a predominantly threat-based analysis of the many and varied potential threats to western liberal democracies, in particular the U.S. These studies though, have accomplished little to cast light on the probability of any particular threat being employed, as this is a factor of the underlying strategy that would employ them. Consequently, this essay concludes that asymmetry in war demands a focus on strategy. Military analysts have no problem quantifying capabilities and limitations, tactics and effects. They have a far harder time quantifying our vulnerabilities where coherent strategies can be directed. But by understanding the social, political and military constraints that are inherent in our society we can start to see some of the vulnerabilities that might afford our enemies the opportunity to circumvent western military and technological superiority. From an understanding of our vulnerabilities it is also easier to perceive the potential enemy strategies that a weak actor might try to effect and will illuminate the measures required to mitigate the risks and preserve our strategic and operational goals.

In closing, it is time that a new definition is proposed to limit the application of the term asymmetry in war to refer to asymmetric wars and asymmetric strategy only. The former refers to wars where a manifestly weak state is in conflict with a superior economic and military power. The latter refers to the weak actor's strategy aimed at leveraging inferior capabilities against vulnerabilities in the strong actor's social, political and military structures in a battle-space where the stronger opponent cannot or will not exercise power. By focusing on the enemy's asymmetric strategy, the seemingly endless lists of conventional and unconventional threats will accrue some value of probability and will assist with the allocation of valuable force protection and interdiction forces.

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