

Notes

1. This article is, regarding sea power, based on Wedin, Lars : *Stratégie maritime, stratégie navale. La modernité de Castex*, NUVIS éditions, Paris 2015.
2. Castex, Amiral [Raoul] : *Théories stratégiques*, Institut de Stratégie Comparée and Économica, Paris 1997, vol 1, p. 81.
3. During operation Unified Protector against the forces of Gadhafi in Libya (2011), frigates of the type *Horizon* have played the role of C2 *Primary Unit* in the *Air Tasking Order* (ATO).
4. Mahan, A.T.: *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660 – 1783*, Sampson Low, Marston & Company, London, no year given, probably 1889, p. 23.
5. Ibid. p. 29.
6. Corbett, Sir Julian S.: *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, Conway Maritime Press, London 1972 [1911], p. 90.
7. Nye, Joseph S.: *The Future of Power*, Public affairs, New York 2011, pp. 20-21.
8. Maritime forces are all forces that have a vocation to act on the sea: navy, possible coast guard, maritime air based on land and so forth.
9. Op. cit. Castex, Raoul, see note 2, vol. V, p. 87.
10. Depeyre, Michel : *Entre Vent et eau. Un siècle d'hésitations tactiques et stratégiques 1790-1890*, Économica and Institut de Stratégie Comparée, Paris, p. 486.
11. Quoted in Coutau-Bégarie, Hervé: *Traité de Stratégie*, Économica and Institut de Stratégie Comparée, Paris 1999, p. 481.
12. Command, control, computers, communications, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance.
13. Ibid. p. 247; In French one uses the terms 'force acro-terrestre' and 'aero-navale', respectively.
14. See Tangredi, Sam J.: *Anti-Access Warfare. Countering A2/AD strategies*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis 2013.
15. Douhet, [Giulio]: *La Guerre de l'air*, Présentation de M. Étienne Riché, préface du général Tulasne, Journal « Les Ailes », Paris 1932, p. 56.
16. Warden III, John A.: « L'ennemi en tant que système », *Stratégique* No 59, Institut de Stratégie Comparée, Paris 1995, p. 28.
17. Ibid. p. 9.
18. AGM-88 High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile (HARM) is a missile fired against air defence radars.
19. Called IS for « Islamic State » – it is, however, NOT a state even if wants to be one.
20. See Brustlein, Corentin; Durand, Étienne de; Tenenbaum, Élie: *La suprématie aérienne en péril. Menaces et contre-stratégies à l'horizon 2030*, Centre d'études stratégiques aérospatiales, La documentation Française, Paris 2014.

The Normality of Asymmetric Warfare av Tormod Heier

Resyme

Asymmetrisk krigføring ses ofte på med et nedlatende blikk i Vesten. Men også Vesten fører asymmetrisk krig. Blant annet utnyttes egne komparative fortrinn samtidig som motpartens sårbarheter utnyttes. Det er slik asymmetriske fordeler oppnås, og som gjør at asymmetri i krig er et tidløst fenomen. Dette vet også motstanderne til Vestlige styrker. Opp gjennom historien har krigførende parter derfor alltid utnyttet hverandres sårbarheter. Det er derfor en fordel om vestlige styrker stopper bombingene i tide. Med andre ord: for mange bomber og totale seire på taktisk nivå kan fort bli kontraproduktivt på det politiske – fordi motpartens *modus operandi* endres fra symmetrisk til asymmetrisk karakter. Derfor: Med mindre vestli-

ge styrker ikke underlegges en sterkere sivil kontroll nedover i kommandokjeden vil det fortsatt vinnes mange kriger på det taktiske nivået. Men en form for politisk uttelling vil neppe skje. Dette åpner opp for tettere integrasjon mellom diplomati, militærmakt, økonomisk, juridisk og humanitær bistand. Hvis ikke kan Vestens sterke sider raskt bli en del av problemet snarere enn en del av løsningen.

SCRUTINISING WARS' REVOLUTIONARY change after the French Revolution, Carl von Clausewitz codified a perennial doctrine: «War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale». In this duel, opponents fight for the ultimate objective, which is to compel the other to do our will.¹ Protecting one's own shortcomings while exploiting the opponent's weakness is therefore instrumental for political success, and may be regarded as relevant today as in previous times. In this article, the continued importance of asymmetry is scrutinised. Partly by describing challenges that tend to arise when «the West» employs overwhelming force against inferior opponents in unfamiliar societies. And partly by taking into account the increasingly short *warning-time* that tends to arise as Western forces are dragged into megacities and urban warfare.

The perennial logic

The timelessness of asymmetry is most clearly encapsulated in the oriental school of thought. As pointed out by Sun Tzu, asymmetric warfare should deliberately exploit own advantages in order to strike towards the opponent's shortcomings.² This doctrine has ever since been a universal rule of thumb, and hence a key imperative for any rational use of force. Being a key feature in European, Russian and American military thinking, it may be claimed that asymmetry is the most rational and necessary principle undertaken by any party, at any time, in any war.³ But is asymmetric warfare as

relevant for the stronger party as it is for the inferior one? After all, superior states and alliances, such as the United States and NATO, seem to emphasise symmetry rather than asymmetry; as preparations for the next war against Russia or any other conventional opponent is made, conventional deterrence and decisive battles seems to prevail.

A conventional military mindset inside Western command structures may therefore blur the perennial normality of asymmetry. This may particularly be so for politicians and military strategists that are intimately associated with some of the world's most sophisticated and agile war-fighting systems, but who often tend to associate asymmetry with illegitimate breaches of universal norms and regulations codified in the International Laws of War. Asymmetric wars are therefore often associated with something uncivilised, something brutal or cowardly, and often pursued by subtle or elusive insurgents, such as the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq or the Taliban and Al Qaida in Afghanistan. Maintaining the «moral high ground», asymmetric warfare is often associated with uncontrollable «rag-tags» – insurgents that employ unconventional and low-tech means of reaching increasingly radical ends.⁴ Exalted by even more spectacular and intimate media reports, US and NATO forces may even be outraged as insurgents improve their methods and progressively adapt to new rules of the game to counter Western technological superiority. Avoiding Western preferences for decisive battles on a

transparent and clear-cut battlefield, asymmetric warfare can be seen as an integral part of any viable strategy.

Refining asymmetric warfare

Hence, asymmetric warfare may therefore be interpreted in a broader context. This is a context that goes beyond the Western effort «... to compel the enemy to do our will» in order to «... render the enemy powerless». ⁵ Instead, asymmetric warfare can be regarded as a universal phenomenon that has gained more momentum in the 21st century. This is particularly so as Western forces have pursued wars of regime change inside militarily inferior states in the South. One of the most stunning outcomes from these interventions, whether it is in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Libya or Syria, is that inferior opponents have refined, improved and professionalised their asymmetric *modus operandi*. Their primary operational incentive, whether they are states or non-state actors, is to maintain their «stealthiness». That is, keeping their combat signature below the global radar of Western military intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems. The asymmetric *modus operandi* may of course contrast the «symmetric war» of conventional forces, traditional inter-state war, or «proper war». But it allows even the most inferior opponents to protect their operational and political vulnerabilities while counterattacks against the superior's own shortcomings are planned and executed.

Rather than ditching «asymmetric warfare» into the hands of the inferior, therefore, to make a clearer distinction to the preferable Western «symmetric» way of war, the universal logic of asymmetry could be a fruitful reminder to the Western employment of force in the post-Cold War era. Even «the

West's» most likely symmetric opponent, Russia, operates increasingly asymmetrically. In Ukraine in 2014, Russia's so-called «hybrid war» ⁶ is first of all spelled out by means of neatly synchronised and highly asymmetric manoeuvres. Precisely guided towards the weakest point of its opponents, which is the Western ability to rapidly forge a cohesive and united counter-measure, Russia's primary target seems to be the mindset of its own population, the people in Ukraine, and the often too fragmented security community inside the EU and NATO. Subtle campaigns by ingenious forces, blended with information operations, paramilitary intimidation and subversion from «rag-tag» militias originating from the Russian diaspora, not only blend with conventional operations. They even dominate the campaign. ⁷ Why is the timeless wisdom of asymmetric warfare so important to the West?

The relevance of asymmetry

Firstly, a clearer comprehension of asymmetric warfare is likely to stir more knowledge into the realm of strategy. This is particularly so with regard to how Western forces are employed and how a consistent ends-ways-means relationship between military forces and political objectives is attained. Exploiting one's own advantages while attacking the opponents' vulnerabilities has traditionally been used for defeating conventionally armed enemies, leaving irregular opponents untouched. ⁸ Throughout history, however, there has always been an intimate relationship between regular and irregular forces. This regular-irregular dualism thereby helps us to comprehend a basic fact: there is seldom «a proper decisive conventional war» available in a theatre of operations. Even though some wars, such as the Falklands War

(1982), the first Gulf War (1991) or the Kosovo War (1999) proved to be rather short and decisive, academics and officers have often tended to neglect the uncomfortable and improper sides of asymmetric warfare.⁹ Instead, the many duels between regular and irregular forces have been labelled as something else, such as small wars, guerrilla wars, Stability Operations, Peace Support Operations, or even Military Operations Other Than War.

Secondly, and more important than academic and intellectual ignorance, are Western strategic failures in the post 9/11-environment. The failure relates primarily to the inability of US and NATO forces to translate their military advantages into lasting and favourable political outcomes. The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali and Syria provide fertile ground for this admonition, but require a thorough clarification: Asymmetric warfare is a normal feature in any war. It may even be claimed that additional aspects should be included, such as the basic fact that any employment of force – symmetric or asymmetric – always leads to numerous unintended consequences. These consequences often provide fertile ground for new and even more vicious opponents that operate in a more radical and brutal manner than the original opponent. The growth of the Islamic State in the aftermath of the US operation *Iraqi Freedom* in 2003 is but one example. Unintended consequences from this invasion continues to stir long-term social resentments, increased radicalisation and ultimately a more polarised political landscape for Western civilian diplomats to work on. As there are increasingly fewer moderate elements left to negotiate with (in a society that has been decisively bombed by the strongest party), it may seem as if Western strengths and advantages should

be used with more caution and diplomatic sensitivity. What may this imply?

Civilian control over military means

Clearly, a more gentle approach as to how Western military advantages are exploited, and how an opponents' vulnerable forces are annihilated, has little resemblance with Clausewitz' doctrine of «rendering the enemy powerless», which according to Western military thought is the «true aim of warfare».¹⁰ By this recognition, we may also take a more critical stance towards arguments where own forces should «give full play to its own advantages». Could it be that Western military advantages have become too predominant in 21st century warfare? Have Western forces played their comparative strength too far? Are Western forces too deadly, acting too decisively or employing their weaponry too efficiently? In other words, are the opponents' weaknesses exploited too ruthlessly? Questioning the fragile balance between calibrated coercive diplomacy and decisive annihilation thereby triggers new questions that deal with civilian control over their military servants' professional autonomy. Have Western forces become too independent from their civilian masters? In other words, have politicians and their diplomatic advisors no longer control over the outcome of the violence performed by their military subordinates?¹¹

Empirical evidence from the initial stages of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and above all Libya underscore the relevance of the question. In all the three wars, Western forces fought extensively asymmetrically. US and NATO advantages were ruthlessly exploited: precision-guided munitions, night vision goggles, air-ground-surveillance, signals in-

telligence and stealth aircraft all contributed to an almost perfect and rapid military victory. Through these comparative strengths, the opponents' weaknesses were systematically attacked; conventional Taliban, Iraqi and Libyan formations were effectively decimated as their military weaknesses were exposed – and ruthlessly exploited.

But in each of the three wars, the consecutive effort to translate stunning tactical victories into lasting political outcomes, with a vibrant civic community at its core, led to the opposite: a large, complex, unruly and unpredictable *power vacuum* which seemed to paralyse not only the civilian political elite, but also their military servants. The effort to neatly integrate the military instrument into a broader spectrum of civilian instruments of power failed.¹² Instead, the evolving vacuum absorbed an increasing number of regular and irregular forces into a never-ending quagmire, leaving few incentives behind for diplomatic negotiations with moderate opponents that had not been decisively beaten.

It may therefore be claimed that Western forces' exploitation of own advantages has become their worst enemy: politicians at home and their diplomats abroad seem unable to influence, regulate or sufficiently adjust the level of violence employed against their opponents' vulnerabilities in due time. The overwhelming attacks and the successive collapse of Taliban formations in October–December 2001, of Iraqi conventional forces in March–June 2003, and of Libyan governmental forces in June–October 2011, instead lead to a number of humiliating defeats. Western asymmetric advantages were used to an extent so overwhelming that a shift towards an asymmetric *modus operandi* was the only rational way left for the

opponent's battered remnants. Where does this leave us? In other words, what are the implications of a Western doctrine aiming at rendering militarily inferior opponents powerless?

Slippery concepts and morphing forces

The questions invite us to scrutinise more thoroughly the balance between coercive means and diplomatic accommodation. Based on experiences from the post-9/11 environment and the «war on terror», the outcome seems to be «a morphing of Western forces into open-ended asymmetric wars».¹³ This may partly be so because Western forces still seem to be stuck in a «symmetrical war paradigm» where bothersome wars against elusive opponents in Afghanistan will soon come to a welcomed end, and where concerns over Russia's assertive role in post-Soviet client states have renewed our interest in «proper war».

Asymmetric warfare, however, particularly with regard to unequal number of troops, fighting style and degree of legitimacy, may nevertheless be of continued importance. This is first of all because there are similarities between wars that are fought «out-of-area» against insurgents in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, and wars that are prepared for conventional battles against Russia. Even though NATO-Europe refocuses its defence efforts against Russia's conventional forces, experiences from the Spanish War of Liberation against Napoleon's armies (1808–1812), Hitler-Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 or Soviet forces' fight against insurgents in the Baltic States in the 1950s, rests on the same logic as used on the Crimean Peninsula or Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. Despite their long time span, a com-

mon feature is the absence of a clearly defined *Centre of Gravity* in the local theatre of operations – the hub from where all combat energy derives from.¹⁴ This is a point that designates itself as the most attractive target for any Western conventional force that fosters doctrines of short wars and decisive conclusions. As asymmetric warfare goes beyond «out-of-area» operations, the persistent blurring of symmetric and asymmetric war is relevant in Europe as well.

Morphing towards asymmetric warfare

Empirical evidences that underscore the trend may be found in the following three examples. Firstly, the unprecedented rise of Special Forces. This secretive and low-profile capability plays a much more prominent role today as compared to previous decades. From being a largely marginalised group in the 1980s and 1990s, at least among smaller Western states with few colonial interests, Special Forces have increasingly become more stealthy and «civilian look-alikes»; they have become more political in their outreach, and more integrated into states' political decision-making processes, even at the top ministerial levels. Special Forces have even become an integral component in states' embassies and in diplomatic consulates worldwide.¹⁵

Secondly, the morphing metaphor between regular and irregular forces is also recognised inside powerful military-industrial complexes with a global outreach. The BAE Systems in Sweden is but one example: developing so-called «adaptive camouflage» to their Armoured Personnel Carriers (the CV 90), the infrared signature from Hagglund's combat vehicles becomes significantly similar to the signature derived from commercial cars inside modern civic societies.¹⁶ The

military advantage is obvious: conventional forces may more easily hide among civilians, seek protection in densely populated areas, and attack opponents by surprise in an increasingly blurred, complex and compound civil-military battlefield.

And thirdly, as pointed out in the American *Small Wars Doctrine* from 1940 (and confirmed throughout the Western campaign in Afghanistan), «when there is no king to conquer, no capital to seize, no organized army to overthrow, no celebrated strongholds to capture and no great centres of population to occupy»,¹⁷ Western forces tend to transform. Morphing into «civilian look-alikes», manoeuvring with white Toyota Land Cruisers, drilling wells, building schools and acting as humanitarian NGOs, Western forces communicate civil-military ambiguity and contradictory intentions. On the one hand, humanitarian benevolence towards popular demands and expectations are accommodated. On the other hand, complex combat operations are spearheaded towards insurgents in the same area, by the same forces, at the same time.¹⁸

The morphing metaphor is thereby challenging the conception of war, reminding us of the blurred framework between «us or them», «friend or foe», «victory or defeat», «peace or war». These slippery concepts should stir more research on how Western adaptation to asymmetric wars challenge the universal Laws of Armed Conflicts, and the Geneva Protocols in particular – where the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, between civilians and militaries, between legal and illegal targets, are at stake. The crucial overriding question may be this: How far can Western forces go in their effort to become truly asymmetric before they fall victim to the same values and belief systems they are set to defend?

Asymmetry into Megacities

The question above urges us to scrutinise more thoroughly future operational environments. Being accustomed to rural COIN strategies in the Afghan countryside, it can be argued that «the West's» operational focus should be rebalanced. The emergence of so-called «mega-cities» requires Western forces to pay more attention to an increasingly compound and complex urban environment.¹⁹ Reflecting on a more prominent role for Western forces under such circumstances, the ever-increasing trends towards shorter strategic *warning-time* is striking.

Mass incitement in urban environments seems to accelerate by a global development and dissemination of cheap, user-friendly and sophisticated information and communication technology. These devices empower huge masses – with both violent and non-violent intentions – to take rapid, unexpected and decisive action. This ability not only induces more pressure on the individual soldier or unit employed in a megacity, whose role as «strategic corporal» may become even more important than previously known,²⁰ but the unpredictability arising from these technologies, often through social media, significantly also reduces states' *warning-time*. States may therefore find it increasingly difficult to find short-time remedial actions-points to address unexpected and rapidly evolving crises. This again may also trigger broader regional engagements, particularly so as neighbouring states tend to intervene openly or by clandestine operations. This may partly be motivated by a desire to prevent a crisis from escalating, or causing instability on one's own territory, but it may also be a «window of opportunity» for other states to change a regional balance of power.

The US and NATO operations against Libya in March 2011 can be seen in this context. The humanitarian suffering portrayed through the social media inside the rebel stronghold of Benghazi significantly decreased the strategic warning-time. This was the case for decision-makers in the US and Europe as well as for the Libyan leader Muammar al-Gadhafi himself.²¹ In retrospect, short time-spans in crises management seem to be a serious challenge for Western politicians. As decision-making processes accelerate, military outcomes also become less transparent and less controllable. A short strategic warning-time thereby makes it difficult – for politicians and their civil servants – to neatly regulate the use of force so that it is neatly harmonised and calibrated with the other civilian instruments of power. This difficulty may often be due to the absence of trimmed and cohesive command structures,²² and may have a negative impact on the civilian effort to regulate military force inside a broader political tool-box.²³

Conclusion

The argument that «insurgency will always be present in history as long as outraged segments in any population find it useful»²⁴ encapsulate a common feature throughout this article: The logic of asymmetric warfare effectively prevents militarily superior opponents to gain a decisive political outcome. This is why asymmetric warfare is a perennial phenomenon. As long as the weaker side chooses to dissolve its conventional forces and reach for a stealthy signature, and hence engage in a symbiotic relationship with the civil community, a clearly defined – and much appreciated – *Centre of Gravity* cannot be found for Western forces. The absence of opponents with a clear symmetric *modus operandi*, including clear

political intentions and clearly defined conventional capabilities, thereby degrade the political usefulness and superiority of Western forces. This opens up for a new thinking on what relevance and impact military forces may have in comparison with other instruments, such as diplomacy, economic and juridical assistance. Unless Western strengths are neatly controlled and integrated into a broader political project, where

other civilian instruments of power define the premises for success, Western superiority may easily become part of the problem rather than part of a political solution.

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Notes

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14. Op cit, Clausewitz, see note 1, p. 485.
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