

HOW TO FIGHT THE NEXT WAR IN 21ST CENTURY: A DILEMMA FOR STANDING MILITARY FORCES

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Introduction

Twenty first century has proved to be an era of rapid transformation. These transformations in political, economic, technological and military landscape are monumental and are redefining human civilization at a celestial pace. All nations, big or small alike are influenced by these transformation and are coping with best of their ability. Impending future has become increasingly more unpredictable and uncertain. Nations are becoming ever more security concerned and stressed in mitigating conventional and asymmetric threats.

Till the end of twentieth century war was primarily of conventional pattern with a tweak of asymmetric flavour. Military preparations were primarily focused on conventional power. Allies and enemies were clearly defined and response options were determined symmetrically. In eighties, war in Afghanistan projected the effectiveness of non-combatants against the regular military forces at a new dimension. The world became different place ever since and asymmetry became the new talk in military domain.

While every nation is continuing to spend money, manpower, training and time to counter conventional threat, questions are frequently asked, how relevant is the conventional military preparation? Should nation states look for asymmetric options to counter the external threats or rely on conventional military preparation? Today, security situation in Somalia, Syria, West Bank, Iraq, Gazza, Yemen and Afghanistan has made the discussion timely and relevant.

Global Security Scenario

General. The global security environment and likely future trajectories are generally expressed as complex and evolving. After the demise of erstwhile Soviet Union the fear of next global war has mostly diminished. Though serenity is occasionally disturbed by few conventional and greater numbers of asymmetric conflicts, the world has remained a generally peaceful place. While we are seeing

a relative reduction in military violence, at the same time we definitely are seeing an increase in political, economic, and technological violence.¹

USA-Global Hegemon

USA is undoubtedly the *prima donna* in today's world. Enormous military and economic supremacy has carved its uncontested primacy in global affairs. The USA views the world through its own prism and unilaterally decides threats to its national security and to the allies and takes measures to counter the threats. All strategic documents underscore the need for USA's "leadership" on the world stage. USA's National Security Strategy published in February 2015 recognizes that the USA continues to face serious challenges to national security even it is working to shape the future opportunities. And asserts that - any successful strategy to ensure the safety of the American people and advance national security interests must begin with an undeniable truth-America must lead.² Such attitude is uncomfortable to many nations as current US military interventions were pre-emptive and unilateral. The discussions and decisions of National Strategic Guidance, Quadrennial Defense Review, Quadrennial Intelligence Review, Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, Annual Terrorism Report etc affects every human being on the globe either directly or indirectly. Truly, in today's world and in foreseeable future, no one is or will be out of the area of influence of the USA.

Other Powers

- **China.** President George W Bush termed China as strategic competitor, and eventually recognized it as a global power. Monumental economic growth with rapid expansion and modernization of military force projects China as the next superpower. Rise of China has prompted USA's strategic reorientation from Atlantic to the Pacific. In consonance with growing power China has extended activity and influence in Africa, South America and other parts of the globe. Tensions over maritime boundary demarcation in South China Sea and Chinese declaration of exclusive air defence zone have raised tension in the region. USA is focused on isolating China and has developed new Air Sea Battle (ASB) doctrine in 2013 to counter Chinese 'Anti-Access and Area Denial' strategy. Chinese influence on North Korea is another concern for USA and its allies.

1. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui 1999, *Unrestricted Warfare*, p 9.

2. Preface by President Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy 2015*, White House, USA.

- **Russia.** Since the end of cold war Russia was mostly timid in world affairs. But recent role in Ukraine and Syria has made relations with the USA strenuous and reminded cold war era. Russia has inducted new tanks, aircrafts and missiles in 2015 and revamping the conventional warfighting strength. President Putin's decision of using nuclear weapons during Ukraine crisis shows desperation and ongoing military intervention in Syria indicates that Russia is not willing to sit in the side-line of international conflicts anymore.
- **India-Pakistan Relation.** India-Pakistan relation continues to remain bitter and hostile resulting a nuclear hotspot in South Asia. Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine and Somalia are constant war zones and there are no olive leaves in sight. Iran and North Korea are continuing to defy USA's hegemonic attitude and continue to build military capabilities.
- **Rest of the World.** As grim the scenario concerning the abovementioned countries and regions may be, the numbers are handful. Contrarily, most nations, big or small, are enjoying relative peace. These nations though maintain varying size of standing military forces enjoy relative stability and are not significantly threatened by external and internal forces. Irrespective of the diplomatic, military and economic abilities of these nations, their conventional military forces continue to develop and train to fight external threats.
- **Non-State Actors.** Non state actors are the major source of conflict around the world spawning from a goodly amount of political and economic factors. There is no universally accepted definition of non-state actors.³ However, a non-state actor can be described as any organised group with a basic structure of command operating outside state control that uses force to achieve its political or allegedly political objectives.⁴ Such actors may include insurgents, terrorists,⁵ organised armed criminal groups, rebel groups and governments of entities which are not recognised as states. These threats are causing great concerns to a good number of big and small states. Failed or semi-failed states eg Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan etc usually are primary breeding ground for armed non state actors. It is increasingly recognized that non state actors are key actors in contemporary armed conflicts and that interest in studying them is well-based in both academia and policy research.⁶

3. DCAF Horizon 2015, Working Paper No. 5, Armed Non-State Actors: Current Trends & Future Challenges, DCAF & Geneva Call, p 7. available at <http://www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Armed-Non-State-Actors-Current-Trends-Future-Challenges>, accessed on 10 June 2015.

4. This is based on the definition used by the NGO Geneva Call.

5. In common use (as no universally agreed definition exists).

6. Op cit, DCAF Horizon 2015.

Conventional Warfare

General. Conventional warfare has been and arguably is the principal form of warfighting. Since the dawn of civilization, kingdoms and states strived for supremacy through military power. Current world military power balance is exclusively dependent on conventional military power. Presently, the USA is the biggest conventional power closely followed by Russia, China, India and others.⁷ Small or big, present allies or not, most nations are concerned of US military power and consider it as a possible conventional threat. Interestingly, the USA also has the biggest threat concerns from conventional military forces of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea.

Characteristics. Conventional warfare is state centric, firepower intensive, industrialized, focused on armies as the enemy center of gravity, regularized and regulated.⁸ But even that covers a multitude of approaches to warfighting, and neglects a great deal of variation, even within individual societies in a particular period.⁹ Napoleon Bonaparte said 'If they want peace, nations should avoid the pinpricks that precede cannon shots'. Conventional warfare and armies are progressive and thus the French Army today is much different that the Napoleonic one and fights differently. Like organization and equipment, the warfighting concepts and tactics of conventional military forces also evolve with time and transform the next battlefield.

Planning and Preparation. Standing military forces primarily train for conventional warfare and are comfortable with it. Armies neglect conventional warfare at their own peril as acquired and required skills fade in critical branches, like artillery and armour. Conventional forces rely both on quantitative and qualitative superiority over adversaries. Recent conflicts like the Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq Wars have shown, however, that several areas of military innovation have created a virtual revolution in military affairs and greatly enhanced the value of force quality over force quantity in conventional warfighting for nations like the USA that transform their forces to use them.¹⁰ Put differently, nations that make such changes are able to exploit weaknesses in the conventional warfighting capabilities of less advanced powers in ways the military forces of such powers have little near-term hope of countering.¹¹

7. 2015 Global Firepower Index. available at <http://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp>, accessed on 10 Oct 2015.

8. Payne, Kenneth 2012, What is Conventional Warfare? Small War Journal. available at <http://smallwarjournal.com/blog/what-is-conventional-warfare>, accessed on 10 June 2015.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

- Conventional warfighting need long drawn preparation in terms of force generation, equipping, training and maintaining. Such efforts are budget extensive and strain any nation irrespective of economic might.
- Force mobilization, deployment, arraying of forces are not momentary affairs and thus need detail reasoning and analysis before deciding.
- Similarly it is intense in characteristics, large in magnitude, loud in impression and after conflict termination results lasting effect on states and civilizations.
- While the asymmetric war endures the conflict and erodes identity of state; conventional power usually eliminates threat permanently and typically brings lasting peace.

Limitations. Conventional forces are weak against surprise attack by non-combatants, in accepting casualties, low-intensity and infantry/insurgent dominated combat, hostage-taking, kidnapping, terrorism, urban and built-Up area warfare, extended conflict, proxy warfare, false flag operations, ideological and psychological warfare. Besides, conventional forces are bound by Geneva Conventions and other rules of war that manage violence and manage collateral damage in war. Developing conventional forces is budget extensive and cannot be done in few months or years. It also need well defined enemy for focused preparation and human resource pool to embrace soldiering profession as more than a job. None of these are easy and needs good deal of capability and effort.

Asymmetric Warfare

General. Since the end of cold war, asymmetric warfare was a major discussion among the security intelligentsia. After 9/11 the topic got new hype and prominence. The term asymmetry is also frequently used to describe what is also called guerrilla warfare, insurgency, terrorism, counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. In fact anything out of the conventional military domain is now branded asymmetric. In the modern context, asymmetric warfare is increasingly considered a component of fourth generation warfare. When practiced outside the laws of war, it is often defined as terrorism.

Definition. The concept of asymmetry in warfare is not new rather has been around for thousands of years. Sun Tzu said, all warfare is asymmetric because one exploits an enemy's strengths while attacking his weaknesses. Ancient and medieval wars hosts many examples of asymmetry eg the Trojan Horse, trench in Battle of Khandak etc. Modern theorists like B H Liddle hart said "The wisest

strategy avoids the enemy's strength and probes for weakness'. These days the term asymmetric warfare covers everything from catastrophic terrorist attacks to insurgents' roadside bombs, to proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to advanced computer viruses. However, some contemporary definitions are appended below:

- The US Army doctrine defined asymmetric engagements as those between dissimilar forces, specifically air versus land, air versus sea, and so forth. This very narrow concept of asymmetry had limited utility.
- President John F. Kennedy, in a remark to the Graduating Class of the US Military Academy, West Point, New York on June 6, 1962 said, "This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. . . . It preys on economic unrest and ethnic conflicts. It requires in those situations where we must counter it..."
- Asymmetric warfare can describe a conflict in which the resources of two belligerents differ in essence and in the struggle, interact and attempt to exploit each other's characteristic weaknesses. Such struggles often involve strategies and tactics of unconventional warfare the weaker combatants attempting to use strategy to offset deficiencies in quantity or quality.¹²
- Warfare in which the two or more belligerents are mismatched in their military capabilities or accustomed methods of engagement such that the militarily disadvantaged power must press its special advantages or . . . its enemy's particular weaknesses if they are to prevail.¹³
- Warfare that is between opposing forces which differ greatly in military power and that typically involves the use of unconventional weapons and tactics (such as those associated with guerrilla warfare and terrorist attacks).¹⁴

12. Stepanova, E. 2008, 'Terrorism in asymmetrical conflict: SIPRI Report 23. Oxford University Press, available at <http://books.sipri.org/files/RR/SIPRIRR23.pdf> accessed on 10 June 2015.

13. Colonel Robert Shaw, (first commanding officer of the US Army Asymmetric Warfare Group) as cited by Buffalo, David L., in *Defining Asymmetric Warfare*.

14. Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/asymmetric%20warfare>, accessed on 01 Jun 2015.

- Asymmetric warfare is population-centric non-traditional warfare waged between a militarily superior power and one or more inferior powers which encompasses all the following aspects: evaluating and defeating asymmetric threat, conducting asymmetric operations, understanding cultural asymmetry and evaluating asymmetric cost.¹⁵

Conduct. Asymmetric military operations mainly comprise direct action (anti-terrorism), unconventional warfare (counter-insurgency), psychological operations, civil-military operations, foreign internal defense and special reconnaissance.¹⁶ The fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan has made it clear that even USA's pre-eminence in conventional warfighting does not mean the USA has any lead in counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency, or has mastered conflict termination.¹⁷ Interestingly, militaries which are less threatened by external and internal actors often shy away from conventional or symmetric excellence and fail to identify and comprehend asymmetric milieu.

Acceptability. Modern day wars which are dubbed asymmetric rarely solved the core issues leading to war. In asymmetric warfare the aggressor has the liberty of choosing the length of occupation of the captured land. Thus, losing the positive control over own territory and switching over to improvised operations is not acceptable by a country and its military who value sovereignty. Again, what the defender assesses as unacceptable casualty may be tolerable for the aggressor. In that case the defender will be in deep trouble without sovereignty, territorial loss, projected timeline for ending the war and condition of uncertainty. Asymmetry, therefore, is not a "novel" phenomenon as some would characterize it but an intrinsic characteristic of any war.¹⁸ Another important aspect is; asymmetric choice is taken up by a force only when there is lack of conventional warfighting ability. Asymmetric conflicts diminish distinction of combatants from non-combatants, between peace and war, between warzone and peace area, and finally between victory and defeat.

15. Buffaloe, David L. 2006, Defining Asymmetric Warfare, The Land Warfare Papers, No. 58 September 2006, p 15.

16. Ibid, p 21.

17. Cordesman, Anthony H., Paul S. Frederiksen and William D. Sullivan, 2007, Salvaging American Defense: The Challenge of Strategic Overstretch, CSIS, p 15.

18. Heinegg, Wolff Heintschel von, Asymmetric Warfare: How to Respond? International Law Studies -Volume 87, available at <https://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/acee3a17-3574-498e-93b9-5dc553e121ef/Asymmetric-Warfare--How-to-Respond.aspx>, accessed on 10 June 2015.

Examination of Warfighting Options

Renowned modern military thinker Martin Van Creveld argued that the Clausewitzian assumption that war is rational is outdated, and that strategic, logical planning is unrelated to the current realities of guerrilla armies, terrorists and bandits. He reasoned that our most basic ideas of who fights wars, and why, are inadequate. He also ponders conventional warfare as old-fashioned and gave alternative perspective of Clausewitzian trinity of war. Interestingly the Gulf War (1991) erupted within a few months of the appearance of his book 'The Transformation of War' in the United States when he was foreseeing the decline of conventional warfare. Moreover, it was an astounding success for coalition forces by use of large-scale conventional force as an instrument of policy, and vivid manifestation of Clausewitzian trinity.

War in Vietnam and other western colonies like Angola and Mozambique provided backdrop of Andrew Mack's work titled 'Why Big Nations lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric War'. But examination shows that, Vietminh were not insurgents rather were an organized state military force composed of light infantry divisions. On the other hand, tunnel of Cu Chi was a clever defence system not necessarily an asymmetric warfighting technique. Similarly, it can be argued that, few millenniums back, David maintained an effective defence remaining at stand-off distance from Goliath and had utilized an effective contemporary weapon (slingshot) to defeat the enemy. In the same piece of land, later in 2006, Hezbollah used conventional and superior anti-tank missiles to destroy Israeli tanks using standard tank hunting drills and used strict radio silence and clever communication technique to neutralize Israeli electronic attack. Therefore, Hezbollah may be considered a small but effective military force during Lebanon Conflict and not branded as an asymmetric force.

Today, the rise and dominance of the USA is the prime factor that has given relevance to asymmetry in last few decades and is even more prominent now. As the USA is involved and fights in most ongoing major conflicts, the vast difference in military capability of the USA and its adversaries automatically brings the asymmetry into the discussion. However, while the USA remains the champion in military domain, the present runner-ups like China and Russia are not vying to develop asymmetric force and tactics, rather striving to develop conventional parity. Thus, the idea of 'Unrestricted Warfare'¹⁹ is not an official Chinese doctrine and cannot be equated as asymmetry.

19. Unrestricted Warfare (literally "warfare beyond bounds") is a book on military strategy written in 1999 by two colonels in the People's Liberation Army, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. It discusses how a nation such as China can defeat a technologically superior opponent (such as the United States) through a variety of means.

A contemporary topic in military discussion is to involve standing military force in asymmetric wars. Fighting war within the binds of state and international laws is imperative for conventional military force. Terrorist acts and fighting unconventional conflicts are not standing military's role. Contrarily, non-state actors thrive on ideological strength. Ideology breeds political motivation for building combat force that aspires to fight war. Conventional military force acts on mission not ideology. Therefore, adding ideological strength to enhance combat power to offset conventional weakness is a myth. Again, idea of asymmetry has an inherent sense of relegation from well-defined to undefined arena. Such confusions are bound to affect the training and combat efficiency of any standing military forces. Besides, asymmetric doctrine/tactics remains a surprise for enemy till it remains secret or unknown. Anything put in paper as doctrinal guideline for conventional military force is not likely to yield desired victory as enemy will have ready responses.

Henry Kissinger stated 'A conventional army loses if it does not win. The guerrilla wins if it does not lose'. This axiom often confuses the decision makers to field conventional military force against non-state actors. Interestingly, asymmetric forces fight well in defensive role only in failed states but at the end fail to restore stability and normalcy eg Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine etc. The popular topic of 'nation at arms' is also not of any significant value either. Pashtuns had swords and rifles as inseparable part of their body for centuries. Cultural aspects like Nanawatai,²⁰ Badal²¹ and Ghayrat²² have maintained the Pashtuns as nation at arms for thousands of years. But it also has kept the Pashtuns involved at intermittent wars for the same period. Same is true today in Palestine, Iraq and Yemen. A nation at arms is essentially nation at constant war.

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20. Pashto word meaning sanctuary, is a tenet of the Pashtunwali code that allows a beleaguered person to enter the house of any other person and make a request of him which cannot be refused, even at the cost of the host's own life or fortune.
 21. Pashto word meaning justice. To seek justice or take revenge against the wrongdoer. Justice in Pashtun lore needs elaborating: even a mere taunt (or "Paighor") is regarded as an insult - which can only usually be redressed by shedding taunter's blood (and if he isn't available, then his next closest male relation). This in turn leads to a blood feud that can last generations and involve whole tribes with the loss of hundreds of lives.
 22. Pashto word meaning honour or dignity. Honour has great importance in Pashtun society and most other codes of life are aimed towards the preservation of one's honour or pride.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, wars and conflicts in 21st century are more complex than before. Emergence of non-state actors and their participation in recent conflicts have caused dilemma among military and political leadership on the choice of warfare they are to prepare and if necessary embark on. Of course, wars aren't fought in accordance with mathematical equations, and there are many other important factors, including leadership, discipline, morale, training, and health. Nevertheless, analysis of battles between conventional forces over the years has supported the thrust of Lanchester's Law: numbers do make a huge difference.²³ Therefore, as it is unacceptable for a conventional military force to disintegrate its entity and for a country to wipe its name, state military forces should continue to focus on developing conventional military power. One should remember that, military is part of political domain but can seldom shape political ideology of a nation.

Wars like before are fought for attaining political ends of the countries and nations. Even the ideology for which the non-state actors fight has a political linkage. Victory and desired end states are ultimate prize in war for both conventional military forces and non-state actors. In combat, one thrust or slash of sword is better than thousand pin pricks. Pin pricks may annoy or irritate but cannot bring down the enemy or achieve victory. History shows, in asymmetric campaigns no side can claim to have won and the war essentially does not end. More often than not, it matures the battleground for the next war. Even in our liberation war victory finally came after the conventional offensive campaign by allied forces.

The idea of standing military forces fighting asymmetrically is not a viable option. There are no examples in history where a conventional army has shown the capability to dilute its standard entity in a defensive war and snatch victory. Many of today's conflicts does not qualify to be termed as war. These conflicts are well below the threshold of war and do not necessarily warrant fielding conventional military forces. Keeping standing military forces in garrisons, other forces like para military or auxiliary or even mercenary forces may be employed to counter these asymmetric threat forces.

Most examples of asymmetric warfare are either improvisation or ingenious planning for a conventional war. An ingenious plan by a smaller force that wins war should not be branded as asymmetric. It may be decades before it is clear just

23. Fowler, C. A. "Bert" 2006, Asymmetric Warfare: A Primer, available at <http://spectrum.ieee.org/aerospace/aviation/asymmetric-warfare-a-primer>, accessed on 10 Jun 2015.

how far changes in technology and tactics are changing the nature of warfare, or whether such changes will slow to the point where they bring any stability. But it is certain that a world without war is not a possibility in near future. Therefore, it is prudent for the standing military forces to focus on conventional strength and remain prepared for the next war.

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