

Asymmetric Warfare

PATRICK A. MELLO

Technische Universität Dresden, Germany

Asymmetric warfare is commonly defined as a mode of combat where the aims, means, or methods of two parties in conflict are substantively dissimilar. Most scholars further assume a gaping power disparity between the warring parties in asymmetric conflicts. In this sense, most armed conflicts are fully or partially asymmetric. For instance, due to the United States' overwhelming military capabilities, any conflict that involves this country would by definition be asymmetric in nature. Likewise, any conflict between state and nonstate actors is characterized by asymmetry. However, a twofold distinction can be made, which separates *asymmetry of strength* from *asymmetry of weakness*. The former rests on an actor's ability to play to its own strengths, most often through superior technology and military capability. The latter refers to a strategy that seeks to exploit an opponent's weaknesses, often through indirect and drawn out warfare (Münkler, 2006). While narrow conceptions of asymmetric warfare largely focus on differences in military and economic power, more comprehensive understandings of the term emphasize that disparities in political and military strategy, notions of time, and organizational characteristics of the parties in conflict are just as important as differences in material capabilities.

Asymmetric warfare stands in contrast to traditional, if somewhat idealized, notions of interstate war; the latter is represented as a form of armed confrontation between states that is *symmetrical* in the sense that regular armies are deployed for combat, are operating with similar weaponry, and are using comparable tactics of warfare. Hence in symmetrical wars both sides employ equivalent means and methods, even if one side is inferior to the other in terms of military capabilities. By contrast, asymmetric warfare entails modes of combat such as *insurgency* and *counterinsurgency*, *partisan* and *guerrilla* warfare, *terrorism*,

and *cyberattacks*. Most of these strategies and tactics are used by weaker actors who are incapable or unwilling to engage the enemy on equal terms. The use of unconventional methods enables them to overcome their conventional weakness vis-à-vis an opponent who is superior in terms of technology and military capacity. Yet asymmetry need not be associated solely with weaker actors. Strong actors can also shift toward asymmetric warfare when this serves their needs. This can entail the use of air power or long-range missile attacks against an opponent who cannot respond in kind.

The study of asymmetric conflict has an established pedigree. Nonetheless, the term "asymmetric warfare" gained policy currency only after the Cold War, being first mentioned in the National Security Strategy issued by the Clinton administration in 1997. In that document it was asserted that, because of its tremendous conventional military arsenal, any future challenger to the United States would rather employ asymmetric means such as weapons of mass destruction, cyberattacks, or terrorism. However, the essence of asymmetric warfare can be traced back to numerous historical examples. One of the first instances during the modern period was the violent struggle between Spanish partisans and a French invasion force under Napoleon, whose armies occupied Spain from 1808 till 1814. Despite their military inferiority, the Spanish guerrillas eventually forced the French to withdraw from Spain through a series of pinprick attacks, skirmishes, and indirect combat.

Asymmetric warfare is further regarded an essential characteristic of the "new wars" that emerged during the final decades of the twentieth century. The mode of warfare in new wars shows remnants of guerrilla warfare but is closer related to approaches of counterinsurgency. Whereas the classic conception of guerrilla warfare served as a model for many rebel and insurgent groups because of its aim of capturing the "hearts and minds" of the local population, counterinsurgency techniques seek to destabilize and instill fear and hatred among the local population

The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology. Edited by George Ritzer.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781405165518.wbeos0773



(Mello, 2010). In this context, Herfried Münkler suggests that “wars of attrition” constitute a specific type of asymmetric war. This form of conflict shares some characteristics of guerrilla warfare, in the sense that it is a strategy of *deceleration*. It is a response of weaker actors to the technological, economic, and military superiority of their adversary. Outlasting thus becomes more important than winning military skirmishes, because success will come through the psychological exhaustion of the enemy. Münkler argues that the postheroic societies in the west tend to have a low tolerance for military casualties and economic burdens. Thus they plan for short and intense conflicts. The longer a war lasts, the higher the probability that a postheroic society will withdraw its troops (Münkler, 2006).

Notwithstanding its currency as a catchphrase, commentators have questioned the analytical utility of the concept of asymmetric warfare. Indeed, if it is taken merely as a synonym for *partisan* or *guerrilla* warfare, then the neologism *asymmetric warfare* has little new to offer – except adding to the conceptual confusion created by a plethora of similar terms such as *irregular*, *unconventional*, *hybrid*, *low-intensity*, or *fourth generation* warfare. On the other hand, if asymmetric warfare is applied to virtually *all forms* of dissimilar configurations of actors, aims, means, or methods in warfare, then it also loses its distinctive edge. Hence many scholars deem the phrase *asymmetric warfare* unhelpful in analytical terms. Other scholars formulate a normative critique of the prevailing debate on asymmetric warfare. Here it is argued that, rather than being neutral and descriptive, discourse on asymmetric warfare contributes to a rationalization and

legitimation of state brutality against nonstate actors and of collective forms of punishment against entire populations that become enmeshed in conflicts between powerful states; these populations are being targeted by weaker nonstate actors that use asymmetric means (Winter, 2011).

SEE ALSO: Terrorism; War; War and Development in the Twenty-First Century

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