

Asymmetric Warfare

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Asymmetric warfare is commonly defined as a mode of combat where the aims, means, or methods of the conflict parties are substantively dissimilar. Most scholars further presume 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 its overwhelming military capabilities, any conflict that involves the United States would by definition be asymmetric in nature. Likewise, any conflict between state and non-state actors is characterized by asymmetry. However, a two-fold distinction can be made, separating *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 conflict parties are equally important as differences in material capabilities.

Asymmetric warfare stands in contrast to traditional, if somewhat idealized, notions of interstate war, as a form of armed confrontation between states that is *symmetrical* in the sense that regular armies are deployed for combat, operating with similar weaponry, and 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 *counter-insurgency*, *partisan* and *guerrilla* warfare, *terrorism*, and *cyber attacks*. 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 these actors 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 towards asymmetric warfare when it serves their needs. This can entail the use of air power or long-range missile attacks against an opponent that 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, cyber attacks, 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 its 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 it is closer related to approaches of counter-insurgency. Whereas the classic conception of guerrilla warfare served as a model for many rebel and insurgent groups with its aim to capture the “hearts and minds” of the local

population, counter-insurgency techniques seek to destabilize and instil fear and hatred among the local population (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 post-heroic 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 post-heroic society will withdraw its troops (Münkler 2006).

Notwithstanding its currency as a catch phrase, commentators have questioned the analytical utility of the term asymmetric warfare. Indeed, if it is taken merely as a synonym for *partisan* or *guerrilla* warfare, then the neologism of asymmetric warfare has little new to offer, despite adding to the conceptual confusion created by a plethora of similar terms such as *irregular*, *unconventional*, *hybrid*, *low-intensity*, or *fourth generation* warfare, and other, related expressions. 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 term 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 non-state actors and collective forms of punishment against entire populations who become enmeshed in conflicts between powerful states that are being targeted by weaker non-state actors using asymmetric means (Winter 2011).

SEE ALSO: Terrorism; War; War and Development in the 21st Century; War on terror.

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