

“Asymmetrical Threat Concept and its Reflections on International Security”
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Less than three weeks after al-Qaeda terrorists crashed hijacked passenger jets into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in rural Pennsylvania, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld issued his first Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report.¹ He wrote that it was imperative that the U.S. military plan not only for conventional wars, but that it should also develop strategies to “deter and defeat adversaries who will rely on surprise, deception, and asymmetric warfare to achieve their objectives.”² Rather than plan for large military operations, or even small wars limited to specific nation-states, the Pentagon should develop strategies to tackle unconventional threats from both state and non-state actors who might seek to attack U.S. interests.

Asymmetric threats are not new, nor are strategists’ attention to them. In every era, from the pre-modern to the present day, weak forces utilize surprise, technology, innovative tactics, or what some might consider violations of military etiquette to challenge the strong. The 1991 Iraq War and subsequent al-Qaeda terrorism shattered notions that the collapse of the Soviet Union would usher in an age of peace or an end to history. In order to ensure cohesion in both appropriations and strategy, Congress in 1996 passed legislation³ requiring the Pentagon to conduct quadrennial defense reviews. In the first report the following year, then-Secretary of Defense William Cohen identified “asymmetric challenges” and “asymmetric means” as a major component of future threats. Adversaries, the report found, “are likely to seek advantage over the United States by using unconventional approaches to *circumvent* or *undermine* our strengths while *exploiting* our vulnerabilities.”⁴

Identifying the existence of asymmetrical threats is far easier than to define them. While asymmetry focuses on how to place one strengths against an adversary’s weaknesses, even where the overall correlation of forces may favor the adversary, there remains no consensus about the nature of the asymmetric threat concept. Stephen J. Lambakis, a senior analyst in space power and policy studies at the National Institute for Public Policy, questions the usefulness of the concept, given the lack of consensus over its meaning.⁵ Such logic, however, falls flat. After all, that there exists no consensus about the definition of terrorism does not mean that government should not develop counter-terrorism strategies.

¹ U.S. Department of Defense. *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*. September 30, 2001. Available at: www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr2001.pdf. Hereafter *QDR* (2001).

² *QDR* (2001), p. iv.

³ Public Law 104-201, Sept. 23, 1996. <http://www.dod.mil/dodgc/olc/docs/1997NDAA.pdf>

⁴ *QDR* (1997), <http://www.fas.org/man/docs/qdr/sec2.html>; and

⁵ Stephen J. Lambakis. “Reconsidering Asymmetric Warfare.” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, February 2005, pp. 102-108. C.A. Primmerman also observed that many definitions of “asymmetric threat” stand up neither to historical nor logical scrutiny [C.A. Primmerman, “Thoughts on the Meaning of ‘Asymmetric Threats.’” (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lincoln Laboratory, 2006), 1, <http://stinet.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=A444192&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>]

Still, the breadth of asymmetrical threats undercuts the notion that there can be any unified response to them. While, in general terms, the asymmetrical threat concept describes how the weak might battle the strong, discussions diverge when discussing asymmetrical threats from states versus those posed by non-state actors.

The interplay between technology and asymmetry

Control of technology is among the most important factors in determining state power. History is replete with centralized states seeking to consolidate control and peripheral forces resisting it. Fracturing of central control marked the decline of the Abbasid Empire. Authorities might have paid nominal heed to the caliph in Baghdad, but local dynasties held sway. They controlled the military necessary both to ensure obedience from local residents and to counter pretensions to control from Baghdad. These city states and small polities became easy pickings for the Mongol hordes who swept through Asia and Europe in the 13th century. No sooner had they departed, though, than centrifugal forces again fractured Asia and Europe. With no central monopoly over the most advanced weaponry—bows, arrows, and iron—they could not overcome challenges to control of vast and far-away territories.

The components of military balance-of-power changed, though, in the fifteenth century. Governments monopolized gunpowder technology and found their relative power over the periphery to increase when they controlled artillery which smaller states could not master or afford. Rulers could control far broader swaths of territory than had earlier been possible. In the early sixteenth century, the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal states—the so-called “Gunpowder Empires”—together stretched from Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia.⁶

Their monopoly faded over time. Both internal and external challenges eroded the empire’s control over its periphery. The Ottoman sultan lost control over large chunks of North Africa, the Safavid Empire disintegrated into rival states on the Iranian plateau, and the Mughal Empire disintegrated. European armies, though deficient in numbers compared to their Middle Eastern and Asian counterparts, made vast inroads, if not formally colonizing territory, than nevertheless exerting informal influence over it.

While the Islamic world never again rose to challenge Europe, within the context of their own societies, Muslim rulers soon regained advantage over their periphery. The communications revolution swung the balance of power in favor of the central government. While weak within, for example, the Qajar dynasty in Iran experienced a resurgence of power when it invested in the telegraph to bolster communications among government officials dispersed across the nation. For a few decades in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they consolidated control over restive provinces. They had a technological advantage and re-established an asymmetric relationship. However, with time, they lost their comparative advantage. Opponents used the communications technology to coordinate a mass movement to check the government’s power. The result was a period of upheaval and mass movements, culminating in the 1905-1911 Constitutional Revolution. Technology not only enables asymmetry in power relations, but can also be used to overcome it.

⁶ Marshall G.S. Hodgson. *The Venture of Islam: Volume 3: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 17.

The American Experience

If asymmetry involves merely a conflict of weak against strong, or non-traditional versus traditional, then the American Revolutionary War is an example of asymmetrical warfare. General George Washington did not confine himself to confront the British head-on in battle, but rather engaged in guerilla operations, hit-and-run attacks, and tactical surprise.

Upon winning its independence, the new U.S. government, still weak relative to European powers, sought benefit in its isolation. Speaking before Congress on December 2, 1823, the nation's fifth president James Monroe outlined what would become called the Monroe Doctrine: The U.S. would remain neutral with regard to European conflicts, but would consider any European military involvement among the independent states of the Western hemisphere to be dangerous and contrary to U.S. peace and safety.

Washington did not envision a role as a global power until difficulties projecting force simultaneously against Cuba and the Philippines during the 1898 Spanish-American War forced reassessment. As military technology advanced, the security borne by distance declined. Abutting two oceans doubled naval needs. Throughout the 1930s, the U.S. Navy sought to determine how much force they needed to project power in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.⁷ World War II cemented the United States as a global superpower.

U.S. victory in the war ushered in an era of optimism. The United States was an industrial powerhouse. And, as the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated, Washington controlled unrivaled technological superiority. But outbreak of the Cold War and the 1957 launch of Sputnik shook U.S. confidence. The Soviet Union had not only achieved technological parity, but also had surpassed it. Throughout the Cold War, both Democrats and Republicans considered Soviet expansionism an existential threat.

The World War II rocket race between Nazi Germany and the West, and the subsequent Cold War arms race characterized by the development of bigger nuclear bombs, convinced major powers that military victory depended upon technological advancement.

But while Washington and Moscow engaged in a race to build larger and more lethal weaponry, insurgents developed their own doctrine in order to amplify the impact of their inferior forces. After the Japanese invasion of China, revolutionary leader Mao Zedong sought to trade space for time, forcing his Japanese adversaries to stretch their supply lines thin. Insurgents elsewhere favored pinpoint attacks on troops or critical infrastructure.

While the U.S. military fought a conventional army that occasionally employed irregular tactics in the Korean War, its engagement in Vietnam was a different and more formidable experience. Throughout the war, the U.S. maintained air superiority. Initial U.S. strategy prepared the terrain to maximize U.S. strengths. In 1968, Gen. William Westmoreland established the Marine base at Khe Sanh to lure Viet Cong and decimate

⁷ For an excellent review of the history of U.S. defense posture, see: Gary J. Schmitt and Thomas Donnelly, "Numbers Matter" in Schmitt and Donnelly, eds. *Of Men and Material: The Crisis in Military Resources*. (Washington: The American Enterprise Institute Press, 2007), pp. 5-29.

them from above.⁸ The tactic had mixed success. While U.S. forces inflicted high casualties, the Viet Cong consolidated control of the terrain, eventually forcing Khe Sanh's evacuation. Air power did not substitute for ground control. U.S. airpower may have disrupted Viet Cong supply lines, but it did not interdict them. Soviet provision of surface-to-air missiles helped to blunt U.S. air superiority at a relatively low cost. Viet Cong casualties—more than three million killed⁹ in comparison to 58,000 American deaths—was a cost Hanoi considered acceptable. Faced with an opponent willing to suffer so many casualties—a price many Western countries and democracies were unwilling to pay—Washington could do little, while the Viet Cong could simply achieve victory by outlasting its opponents. Donald J. Mrozek, a Kansas State University military historian, concluded, “Although willing to accept the occasional tactical gain, all the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong really needed to accomplish while U.S. forces remained in Vietnam was to avoid catastrophic loss while ensuring political instability throughout the south.”¹⁰ Only after Hanoi split Saigon from its superpower sponsor did they revert to a conventional, tank-led force to capture the South.

Chechen nationalists and their foreign supporters pursued the same strategy in their war against Russia. Their willingness to suffer immense casualties—or, at least to permit the civilian population to suffer—may not have won an independent state, but they have both denied the Russian military the victory which Moscow sought and eroded international unwillingness to offer them concession in response to violence.¹¹ In July and August 2006, Hezbollah survived a withering Israeli air bombardment to claim victory amidst the rubble.¹² Careful planning and battlefield preparation coupled with a willingness to sacrifice Lebanese infrastructure paid off for the Iranian-trained group.¹³ Had Serb officials shown the same morbid stamina in Kosovo, they might still control that territory. The question boils down to a battle between coercion and resilience. While the Serbs and many industrialized societies are unwilling to suffer unlimited civilian casualties, al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah assign no such value to civilians in their areas of operation or control.

International legal constraints adopted by Western governments shift the balance in favor of resilience and so empower liberation movements, guerilla groups, and terrorists. Many African and Middle Eastern states augment their power relative to Western countries simply by eschewing legal responsibilities. The trend among European Union officials, U.S. military lawyers, and non-governmental organizations to apply maximal Geneva Convention protections universally, regardless of enemy combatant adherence to the accords, furthers this trend. If adversaries have no incentive to abide by international law, knowing that they are afforded universal protection

⁸ Donald J. Mrozek, “Asymmetric Response to American Air Supremacy in Vietnam,” in: Lloyd J. Matthews, ed. *Challenging the United States Symmetrically and Asymmetrically: Can America Be Defeated?* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 1988), pp. 96.

⁹ “Vietnam-anniversaire.” Agence France Presse, April 4, 2005.

¹⁰ Mrozek, 103.

¹¹ For an example of weakening consensus, see: Richard Pipes, “Give the Chechens a Land of their Own.” *The New York Times*, September 9, 2004.

¹² Al-Manar Television (Beirut), September 22, 2006.

¹³ See Andrew Exum. *Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment*. (Washington: The Washington Institute, 2006), pp. 3-4.

regardless, then there is no consequence to utilizing terror or endangering the civilian population.

Terrorism: Democracy's Achilles' Heel

Terrorism becomes a tactic of choice when its potential to achieve political aims outweighs the costs of its use. Misapplication of international law among Western societies encourages terrorism by decreasing its cost while increasing its effectiveness. On April 15, 2002, for example, six European Union countries endorsed a United Nations Human Rights Commission resolution that endorsed the use of violence as a means to achieve Palestinian statehood.¹⁴ The result, in practice, created a precedent in which terrorists could argue that international humanitarian law justified their embrace of suicide bombing.

The United Nations' mendacity is enabled by a lack of consensus over the meaning of terrorism. A 1988 study found that professionals utilized more than 100 different definitions of terrorism.¹⁵ The UN General Assembly defined terrorism in part as "Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public,"¹⁶ and, in 2005, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan defined terrorism as any act "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act."¹⁷ Neither definition, however, enjoys codified status or the status of law.

Terrorism by nature is irregular, although not always asymmetric. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, for example, have since 2004 concentrated their attacks on the U.S. military in Iraq, where the concentration of U.S. weaponry and air support gives U.S. forces a comparative advantage over softer targets elsewhere, like undefended schools, shopping centers, or public transportation.¹⁸

Nor are all terrorist groups weak. Terrorism is a tactic. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union sponsored both terrorist and separatist groups. Analysts might consider the terrorist groups weak only if they took them out of their full context. But, as proxies of a larger unit, they were no less weak than the states supporting them. The Greek government helped support and supply the Kurdistan Workers Party [Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK] not because Athens was weak in comparison to Ankara, but rather because it simply sought to act by terrorist proxy to weaken a competitor. Stephen Sloan, a terrorism expert at the University of Oklahoma, noted that while terrorism traditionally

¹⁴ Steven Edwards. "UN backs Palestinian violence: Arab, European nations pass resolution supporting use of 'armed struggle.'" *National Post*, April 16, 2002.

¹⁵ Alex P. Schmid, Albert J. Jongman et al., *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1988), pp. 5-6, as cited in Jeffrey Record. *Bounding the Global War on Terrorism*. (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, 2003), p. 6. For the 1974 International Association of Chiefs of Police definition and the 1976 National Advisory Committee on Justice, Criminal Standards, and Goals definition, see: Stephen Sloan, "Terrorism and Asymmetry," in *Challenging the United States Symmetrically and Asymmetrically*, p. 174.

¹⁶ UNGA A/RES/49/60 (December 9, 1994), §13.

¹⁷ "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, security and human rights for all." Report of the Secretary General. March 21, 2005. Chapter 3, §93. <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/chap3.htm>

¹⁸ For this point, I am grateful to American Enterprise Institute resident scholar Frederick W. Kagan.

aimed at resisting state oppression from within, today states use terrorism to amplify force.¹⁹ With state sponsorship, terrorists become more lethal.

Terrorism combines surprise and shock to amplify effect and demoralize the broader public. It is asymmetric only so far as it “attack[s] vulnerabilities not appreciated by the target.”²⁰ The U.S. government remains ill-prepared to counter such surprise. Most U.S. strategic planning with regard to terrorism focuses on replication of past activities. While a few exercises had considered the possibility of hijacked aircraft used as weapons, these were exceptions. Indeed, the Defense Department canceled one drill simulating a hijacked plane crash into the Pentagon because the scenario seemed too far-fetched.²¹ Most thinking was more conventional. U.S. officials increased perimeter security around major public buildings after the 1993 World Trade Center attack and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City two years later.

Many analysts see al-Qaeda as an asymmetric threat. So too does the Pentagon.²² But, whether terrorism is state-sponsored, state-directed, or pan-Islamist, its goals are similar and consistent with traditional psychological operations. Terrorists and traditional state enemies both seek to affect change by demoralizing the public and winning through psychological operations what they cannot win in conventional battle. Democracies are especially vulnerable because of the power their public holds. A former North Vietnamese commander explained, “The conscience of America was part of its war-making capability, and we were turning that power in our favor. America lost because of its democracy; through dissent and protest it lost the ability to mobilize a will to win.”²³

The North Vietnamese strategy was little different than that of Somali militiamen who dragged the body of a mutilated American soldier through the streets of Mogadishu, permitting the international media to broadcast the incident in gruesome detail, or Hezbollah terrorists who carefully stage-managed the international media during the summer 2006 Lebanon war. “The camera and computer have become weapons of war,” Marvin Kalb, senior fellow at Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center, observed in his analysis of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict.²⁴

How effective a terrorist attack may be is inversely proportional to Washington’s own perceptions of its interests. Hezbollah’s 1983 suicide truck bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks succeeded because the Reagan administration judged perseverance in the peacekeeping operation not worth further casualties.²⁵ The Clinton administration made

¹⁹ Stephen Sloan, “Terrorism and Asymmetry,” in *Challenging the United States Symmetrically and Asymmetrically*, p. 176.

²⁰ Bruce W. Bennett, Christopher P. Twomey, and Gregory F. Treverton, *What Are Asymmetric Strategies?* (Washington: RAND, 1999), p. 3.

²¹ Steven Komarow and Tom Squitieri. “NORAD had drills eerily like Sept. 11.” *USA Today*, April 19, 2004.

²² While neither the 2001 or 2006 QDR reference al-Qaeda directly, both refer to the September 11, 2001 attacks as the start of the new war [*QDR* (2001), pg. iii; *QDR* (2006), pg. v].

²³ As quoted in Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., “Preliminary Observations: Asymmetrical Warfare and the Western Mindset,” in Col. Lloyd J. Matthews (U.S. Army, ret.). *Challenging the United States: Symmetrically and Asymmetrically*. (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 1988), p. 7

²⁴ Marvin Kalb. “The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006: The Media as a Weapon in Asymmetrical Conflict.” Faculty Working Paper Series, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, February 2007.

²⁵ Bennett et al., p. 7.

similar calculation after Somali militiamen downed two U.S. MH-60 Black Hawk helicopters on October 3, 1993. Usama Bin Ladin has acknowledged the issue when, on May 28, 1998, he told an American interviewer that “The American soldiers are paper tigers... After a few blows [in Mogadishu], they forgot about being the world leader and the leader of the new world order. They left, dragging their corpses and their shameful defeat.”²⁶

Terrorism aims to affect its opponents psychologically more than militarily. Modern media enables this objective. Prior to establishment of satellite news networks, terrorists seldom enjoyed a sustained global audience, with the Palestinian seizure and murder of Israeli athletes at the 1973 Munich Olympics perhaps the only exception. The proliferation of satellite television networks across the globe wins terrorists a global audience for every hijacking, car bomb, or kidnapping.

Democracies are especially susceptible to such media manipulation. In the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war, satellite channels broadcast bombing damage in both Israel and Lebanon. The openness of Israeli society enabled journalists to access better the Jewish state’s internal political debate and hand-wringing. “A closed society conveys the impression of order and discipline; an open society, buffeted by the crosswinds of reality and rumor, criticism and revelation, conveys the impression of disorder, chaos and uncertainty, but this impression can be misleading,” Kalb observed.²⁷

Validation also bolsters terrorism. Terror sponsors and leaders calculate cost and benefit. Every terrorist attack and every propaganda statement creates forensic evidence which may increase the vulnerability of terrorist leaders or provide evidence to link them with their sponsors. The willingness of satellite television providers to distribute terror propaganda both bolsters terrorist propaganda and bestows an image of legitimacy.²⁸ The Egyptian government’s willingness to host Hezbollah’s al-Manar on its NileSat television provider alongside the state television of Bahrain, Sudan, Kuwait, Syria, and the U.S.-funded al-Hurra legitimizes its incitement and support for terrorism, just as the Danish government’s licensing of Roj TV, the PKK’s media channel, does.²⁹ It was to prevent such legitimacy that the French government eventually removed al-Manar from its Eutelsat.³⁰

More serious, the willingness of Western diplomats to negotiate with terrorists or engage with their sponsors bolsters their legitimacy, validates their tactics, and shields them from consequence. The impact of such engagement creates precedent which empowers a wide range of terrorist groups. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s decision to welcome representatives of Hamas to Ankara in February 2006, undercut Turkish efforts to de-legitimize the PKK, which like the Palestinian terrorist groups, justifies its actions in national liberation.³¹

²⁶ “Usama bin Ladin: ‘American Soldiers are Paper Tigers.’” *Middle East Quarterly*. December 1998. <http://www.meforum.org/article/435>

²⁷ Kalb, p. 5.

²⁸ Doreen Carvajal. “Banning channigel accused of hate speech could be difficult: France finds Beirut station a turnoff.” *International Herald Tribune*, December 10, 2004.

²⁹ “Danish Resistance, Turkish anger in row over Roj TV,” *Zaman*, April 15, 2007.

³⁰ Doreen Carvajal. “French ban Al Manar TV channel.” *International Herald Tribune*, December 14, 2004.

³¹ “Turkey, Israel patch up ties after Hamas tension.” *Turkish Daily News*, February 22, 2006.

Normal diplomatic practice also shields terrorists. Premature recourse to diplomacy can validate the decision to utilize terrorism. Diplomats and journalists both condemned Jerusalem's disproportional military response to the conflict initiated by Hezbollah. Disproportionality, however, is a deterrent to terrorism. Diplomatic linkage between equitable distribution of casualties and legitimacy of conflict has no basis in international law.

Sympathy for a cause often amplifies concern about disproportionality. Terrorism cannot be successful without sympathizers. The Beider Meinhof Gang conducted several terrorist operations in the 1970s, but failed to win support. They may have enjoyed Soviet patronage, but their ideology did not resonate nor could they translate terrorism into recruitment success. Their membership dwindled as West German authorities captured or killed operatives. In contrast, the Irish Republican Army, the ETA (Basque Homeland and Freedom, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), or, for that matter, Hamas and al-Qaeda espouse an ideology popular enough to enable replacement through recruitment. Daniel Byman, director of Georgetown University's security studies program was correct to note, "We continue to pour money into intelligence, homeland defense and the military, but this spending is primarily to defeat today's terrorist cells. More spies and better defenses do little to defeat a hostile ideology."³² It is an observation which the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* seconded. "Victory will come when the enemy's extremist ideologies are discredited in the eyes of their host populations and tacit supporters," the report argued.³³

While it is necessary to combat the ideologies underpinning contemporary terrorism, if the West is to counter the terrorist challenge, it is also important to treat terrorism as a military matter rather than simply a criminal matter. Such a determination is important. If terrorism is a criminal problem, then it should be dealt with by law enforcement. This not only makes prevention difficult, but it also glosses over ideological motivations and the state sponsorship which bolster terrorists' reach and lethality. If terrorism is just a criminal matter, then states cannot use military force to counter it. The Pentagon perceives terrorism as a military matter. "This is both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas," the QDR declares. The report continued to argue that defeat of terrorist networks depended upon augmenting human intelligence, surveillance, special operations, and willingness to conduct irregular warfare.³⁴

A Revolution in Military Affairs?

Many of Rumsfeld's arguments appear tied to the idea that there has been a Revolution in Military Affairs. This concept, which argues that technological advances supplant past emphasis on manpower, received a boost from U.S. dominance over Iraq in Operation Desert Storm.³⁵ Many commentators at the time expressed concern about the mission: Iraq had the fifth largest army in the world, raising fears among Americans of a quagmire or, at the least, a high price for success.³⁶ U.S. dominance—memorialized with

³² Daniel Byman. "How to Fight Terrorism." *The National Interest*. Spring 2005.

³³ *QDR* (2006), pg. 21.

³⁴ *QDR* (2006), pg. 23.

³⁵ See, for example, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, eds. *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*. Santa Monica: Rand, 1999.

³⁶ See, for example, "The Larger Patriotism." *The New York Times*, January 10, 1991. Pg. A24.

video of precision bombs going down chimneys—reinvigorated the notion that technology would dominate future warfare.

Also impacting the debate was the notion of Fourth Generation Warfare. A construction first voiced in 1989, military expert William S. Lind led a team of army and marine officers who posited that there had been three distinct generations of warfare, emphasizing in turn, manpower, firepower, and maneuver. They argued that ideology and/or technology would underpin a fourth generation in warfare, and predicted that this could blur both chain of command and the distinction between civilian and military. Maneuver would trump logistics which, they argued, would become less important than the ability of troops to live off the land. Whereas troop concentration was once an asset, Lind and his colleagues theorized that, in the future, it could become a liability, more vulnerable to attack. Rather than destroy opponents on the battlefield, a new generation of enemies might try to collapse their adversaries from within.³⁷ In such an age, the idea of front and rear lines may be outdated.³⁸

While the Fourth Generation Warfare theory fits events ranging from the rise of al-Qaeda to the Iraqi insurgency, critics point out that the generation division is artificial, somewhat arbitrary, and that it does not elucidate strategies to conduct war against non-conventional forces. Nor are many Fourth Generation ideas new. Sun Tzu, the sixth century B.C. military strategy described similar strategies in *The Art of War*.³⁹ Ancient Greeks, Persians, and later the Mongol hordes mastered the art of demoralizing enemies to collapse societies from within.⁴⁰ More recently, Western states and their proxies eschewed convention and logistics. In 1948, for example, the Philippine Constabulary formed Force X, a group which infiltrated Panay as a fake Huk unit, with the aim to sabotage the Huk rebellion from within by sabotaging ammunition while conducting surveillance. The British conducted similar operations during the Malaya Emergency and in Kenya during the Mau Mau insurgency.⁴¹ Defenders of the Fourth Generation thesis may conclude that the attrition that characterized early and mid-twentieth century warfare will not reoccur,⁴² but this may be a hasty conclusion. Stalemate and attrition characterized the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), even though both sides enjoyed highly educated publics whose militaries had access to missiles, jets, and chemical weaponry. Between 1998 and 2000, Ethiopia and Eritrea fought to a stalemate in a border war that cost, according to some estimates, 70,000 lives.⁴³

Nor is irregular warfare necessarily superior to traditional methods. In his analysis of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, Andrew Exum, a U.S. Army Ranger platoon

³⁷ William S. Lind et al. "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation." *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989, pp. 22-26.

³⁸ This was the conclusion in the official U.S. army history of Operation Iraqi Freedom. See: Col. Gregory Fontenot, Lt. Col. E.J. Degen, and Lt. Col. David Tohn. *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), pg. 414.

³⁹ Sun-Tzu (Roger Ames, trans.), *The Art of Warfare*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1993.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Fourth-Generation War and Other Myths*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2005.

⁴¹ Lawrence E. Cline. *Pseudo-Operations and Counterinsurgency: Lessons from Other Countries*. (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), pp. 1-6.

⁴² Capt. John W. Bellflower, "4th Generation Warfare," *Small Wars Journal*, February 2006. www.smallwarsjournal.com/documents/swjmag/v4/bellflower.htm

⁴³ Ian Fisher. "From an Old-Fashioned War, a Very Modern Calamity." *The New York Times*, June 4, 2000. §4, Pg. 5.

leader in both Afghanistan and Iraq, noted that Hezbollah's decentralization prevented its units from supporting each other in the same way that the more structured Israeli Defense Forces did.⁴⁴

Former West Point professor and American Enterprise Institute military historian Frederick W. Kagan issued an important correction to the popular but mistaken notion that technology can alter the human investment necessary in warfare. He observed that between 1989 and 2003, there were eight major U.S. military operations, five of which resulted in long-term deployments in hostile or semi-hostile environments. Such commitments require large ground forces, irrespective of technological advances.⁴⁵ "Military planning during Donald Rumsfeld's terms as secretary of defense rested on three basic assumptions about the nature of future conflict," Kagan wrote. "Future wars will be short, sharp affairs; their outcomes will turn heavily on the opponents' relative levels of technology; and the United States can and should rely increasingly on using indigenous forces instead of its own ground troops. All three assumptions have been badly undermined by recent operations."⁴⁶

The casualty rates subsequent to George W. Bush's declaration of the end of major combat in Iraq⁴⁷ show Kagan to be correct. While U.S. forces defeated the Iraqi army in just three weeks at a cost of 158 coalition lives, the battle against insurgents, terrorists, and militias cost has since cost more than 20 times as many U.S. lives.

While Rumsfeld directed the Pentagon to expand Special Operations Forces and Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs units and tasked the Air Force to establish an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadron,⁴⁸ such technological prowess has yet to neutralize the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), relatively low-technology devices responsible for the bulk of U.S. casualties.

The Weapons of Mass Destruction threat

While a disparate network of adversaries may utilize low-technology remedies to neutralize U.S. power in Iraq, opposing states may pursue other means to neutralize U.S. military might. In the wake of the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review, the Pentagon's strategy directorate tasked RAND scholars Bruce W. Bennett, Christopher P. Twomey, and Gregory F. Treverton to identify asymmetric threats facing the United States. They agreed that airpower was the United States' chief military asset and focused upon how adversaries might counter it. They predicted adversaries might use a combination of theater missiles and chemical or biological weapons. North Korea, for example, might utilize SCUD missiles equipped with chemical or biological payloads. Other threats they listed included mines, diesel submarines, terrorism, and information warfare.⁴⁹

The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review updated concern about asymmetric challenges to recognize that the most lethal challenges might not come directly from states, but rather that there might be "conflicts in which enemy combatants are not

⁴⁴ Exum, pg. 10.

⁴⁵ Frederick W. Kagan, "Protracted Wars and the Army's Future," in Schmitt and Donnelly, *Of Men and Material*, pp. 30-50.

⁴⁶ Kagan, p. 33.

⁴⁷ "Remarks by the President from the USS Abraham Lincoln," Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, May 1, 2003. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html>

⁴⁸ *QDR* (2006), p. 5.

⁴⁹ Bennett et al., pp. 6-7.

regular military forces of nation-states” and in which adversaries conduct “catastrophic terrorism employing weapons of mass destruction.”⁵⁰

Such concern about weapons of mass destruction has grown with time. International inspections do not provide a credible antidote. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein managed to hide a covert nuclear program for more than a decade despite International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. Hans Blix, who had certified Baghdad’s compliance at the time, later admitted that “the IAEA was fooled by the Iraqis.”⁵¹

Nor do multilateral organizations provide security. In 2006, Charles Primmerman, assistant head of the Sensor Systems Division at the Pentagon-funded Lincoln Laboratory, analyzed asymmetric threats to the United States. While most revolved around weapons of mass destruction, Primmerman suggested an adversary’s pursuit of asymmetric strategies might include not only use of a weapon of mass destruction, but also deception. On one hand, this might include insincere treaty negotiation as cover to develop such weapons, something the Soviet Union did with regard to biological weapons and the Islamic Republic did with regard to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Safeguards Agreement. On the other, he suggested, an adversary might turn such weaponry against its own citizens for the purpose of blaming the other party.⁵² An adversary absorbing a conventional air strike on its nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons facilities might, for example, spread contamination in order to blame the attacker for killing its civilians.

Tactical nuclear weapons also enhance threats. The Soviet Union’s collapse and the subsequent deterioration in Russian conventional forces led Moscow to place greater emphasis on Russia’s tactical nuclear arsenal. Analysts might consider this an asymmetric strategy. It amplified Russian prestige and influence beyond what its economic and military strength might normally presage. Indeed, Russian threats to deploy extra missiles in Belarus have caused European Union bureaucrats to reconsider the desire of Poland and the Czech Republic to host early warning sites and anti-ballistic missiles shields.⁵³ However, Moscow’s strategic calculations have wider repercussions on other nations’ threat perceptions and create a cascading threat. Gunnar Arbman, director of research at the Swedish Defense Research Agency, and Charles Thornton, a research fellow at the Center for International and Security Studies, explain, “The deterioration of its conventional forces means Russia must rely more heavily on its tactical nuclear weapons; and yet, the deteriorated state of the military’s morale, readiness, and reliability means that there is an increased internal threat of the accidental or unauthorized launch, or the proliferation of a nuclear weapon.”⁵⁴

The 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* recognized that possession of weapons of mass destruction was an attractive asymmetric strategy for U.S. adversaries. “They may brandish nuclear, chemical and biological weapons to ensure regime survival, deny the

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Defense. *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006, p. 1. Full report available at: www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf. Hereafter, *QDR* (2006).

⁵¹ Julian Borger. “Inside Story: The Anthrax Hunter.” *The Guardian* (London), April 10, 2002.

⁵² Primmerman, pp. 8-9.

⁵³ Vago Muradian. “Russia Resists Polish Missile Defense Role.” *Defense News*, September 25, 2006. <http://defensenews.com/story.php?F=2104539&C=airwar>

⁵⁴ Gunnar Arbman and Charles Thornton. *Russia’s Tactical Nuclear Weapons*. (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, November 2003), pg. 7.

United States access to critical areas, or deter others from taking action against them,” the report read.⁵⁵ Technological advancement increases the threat, not because weapons may get more sophisticated, but rather because they become more accessible.⁵⁶

Surprise and Dominance

Surprise enhances the effectiveness of asymmetric challenge. History is replete with weaker powers seeking to transform surprise attack into advantage.⁵⁷ Japan, for example, launched surprise attacks against both Russia in 1904 and the United States in 1941. The 1950 Chinese intervention in Korea surprised Western officials, as did the 1965 Pakistani incursion into Kashmir. Few in London expected Argentina’s 1982 invasion of the Falkland Islands.

The Peoples’ Republic of China continues to embrace surprise as mechanism to sidestep comparative weakness on other fronts. Michael Pillsbury, a former Pentagon official and expert on Chinese military doctrine, noted that Beijing’s strategic thinkers consider the Israeli destruction of the Egyptian air force in the opening hours of the 1967 Six-Day War to be a model of inferior forces triumphing over the superior because of surprise. The Chinese navy, likewise, sees submarine warfare as a means to enable its inferior forces to, by stealth, triumph over the superior.⁵⁸

Interwoven into surprise is mastery of the information battlefield. Chang Mengxiong, former senior engineer of the Chinese military’s Beijing Institute of System Engineering, argued that the key to Chinese success in 21st century asymmetric warfare would be Beijing’s development of technologies to attack satellites, electronic warfare aircraft, and ground command sites.⁵⁹ Dominance of the information battlefield might level the playing field and might enable smaller, weaker militaries to enhance their range of operation.

Here space technology may coincide with others aspects of battle strategy. Chief among Beijing’s political and, perhaps, military objectives are reunification with the island nation of Taiwan. However, the Peoples’ Republic lacks the naval assets to ensure victory.⁶⁰ Here, Beijing might use satellite technology to overcome its relative weaknesses. This is reflected in Chinese naval doctrine. “The mastery of outer space will be a prerequisite for naval victory, with outer space becoming the new commanding heights for naval combat,” writes the Chinese Naval Research Institute’s Captain Shen Zhongchang.⁶¹ In this context, the destruction on January 18, 2007, of a Chinese weather satellite by a Chinese anti-satellite missile is worrisome.⁶²

⁵⁵ QDR (2006), pg. 32.

⁵⁶ QDR (2006), pp. 32-33.

⁵⁷ For a thorough discussion, see: T.V. Paul. *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

⁵⁸ Michael Pillsbury. *China Debates the Future Security Environment*. (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2000), pp. 289.

⁵⁹ Pillsbury. *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, p. 292.

⁶⁰ See Piers M. Wood and Charles D. Ferguson, “How China Might Invade Taiwan,” *The Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2001, pp. 55-68.

⁶¹ Pillsbury. *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, p. 293.

⁶² Caitlin Harrington. “Chinese ASAT test rekindles weapons debate.” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, January 24, 2007, p. 4.

Chinese military thinkers have argued that their strategy should center less on conventional battles where troop concentrations are susceptible to remote attack, and more on striking enemy information systems while ensuring Beijing's capacity for information warfare.⁶³ While anti-satellite weaponry might be one method to level or establish dominance over the information field, it is not the only mechanism. Chinese strategist Chen Hu'an explains, "The operational objectives of the two sides on attack and defense are neither the seizing of territory nor the killing of so many enemies, but rather the paralyzing of the other side's information system and the destruction of the other side's will to resist."⁶⁴ U.S. defense strategists are particularly concerned about electromagnetic pulse weapons. The 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* explains, "Expanded reliance on sophisticated electronic technologies by the United States, its allies and partners increases their vulnerability to the destructive effects of electromagnetic pulse (EMP), the energy burst given off during a nuclear weapons explosion."⁶⁵ Less destructive strategies might involve increasingly sophisticated efforts to disrupt computer networks, especially given greater U.S. reliance on net-centric warfare.⁶⁶

Preemption or Diplomacy?

While there may be no unified asymmetric threat, technological advancement coupled with access to and lethality of weapons mandate that every state be prepared to counter threats before they develop fully. No longer can states count on strategic depth to absorb a first blow. Nor, in an age of ideological terror, can strategists assume that mutually assured destruction is an adequate deterrent to the use of nuclear weapons.

The White House outlined its concern about the threat posed by terrorists utilizing weapons of mass destruction in its 2002 National Security Strategy. "The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroad of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination," the president wrote in a letter accompanying its unveiling.⁶⁷ The strategy emphasized pre-emption. "We must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends... We cannot let our enemies strike first."⁶⁸

The 2002 National Security Strategy was controversial from its inception because critics saw it as blurring the line between defense and aggression. Many analysts pointed out that U.S. justification for its own first strikes might create a precedent for other countries to stage surprise attacks. "What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander,"

⁶³ Chen Hu'an. "The Third Military Revolution." *Contemporary Military Affairs*, March 11, 1996, as reproduced in Michael Pillsbury, ed. *Chinese Views of Future Warfare*. (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), p. 391.

⁶⁴ Hu'an, p. 393.

⁶⁵ *QDR* (2006), pg. 33.

⁶⁶ For U.S. reliance on net-centric warfare, see: Lt. Gen. Harry D. Raduege, Jr. "Net-Centric Warfare is Changing the Battlefield Environment," *CrossTalk: The Journal of Defense Software Engineering*. January 2004. <http://www.stsc.hill.af.mil/crossTalk/2004/01/0401Raduege.html>

⁶⁷ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. The White House. September 2002. Here after, *NSS* (2002).

⁶⁸ *NSS* (2002), pp. 14-15.

Oxford University professor Adam Roberts told the *Washington Post*. “I have to say it puzzles America’s allies that that danger doesn’t seem to be fully grasped.”⁶⁹ Indeed, much of the international hostility toward U.S. policy in Iraq reflected less disagreement about the perceived danger posed by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein than the fear that successful regime change in Iraq might create a precedent for forceful regime change. The subsequent difficulties encountered by U.S. forces in Iraq, however, cooled enthusiasm for pre-emption. The 2006 National Security Strategy emphasized multilateralism, with chapters emphasizing the strengthening of alliances, cooperation to defuse regional conflicts, and development of common agendas “with the other main centers of global power.”⁷⁰

Diplomacy is important, but the rush to abandon pre-emption in favor of multilateral affirmation can be irresponsible. If citizens elect political leadership transparently and democratically, then it is the responsibility of that government to guarantee their security, not multilateral organizations whose officials are not directly accountable to any citizenry. The 1981 Israeli air strike on Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor illustrates this issue. The United Nation Security Council “strongly” condemned Israel’s actions⁷¹ and, yet, hindsight shows that the Israeli leadership made the correct decision. International organizations often discuss problems, but they seldom solve them. There is often an inverse relationship between the size of any coalition or multilateral organization, and its effectiveness.

Governments should always first consider the diplomatic option to counter a threat. The costs incumbent in diplomacy are almost always lower than those expended in military conflict. However, diplomacy misapplied can amplify rather than resolve asymmetric threats, especially if they legitimize terrorist violence.

The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, for example, arms and provides safe-haven to the PKK. While Iraqi Kurdish leader Masud Barzani condemns terrorist violence, he ties any *peshmerga* crackdown on the PKK to Turkish political concessions. It is a strategy of blackmail. Should Ankara make political concessions in the face of terror, then it legitimizes Barzani’s support for terrorism and will likely convince the Iraqi Kurdish leader that his best asymmetric strategy is further terror support.

Both Tehran and Damascus have sought to leverage hostage-taking into diplomatic concession,⁷² and the Palestinian Authority under Yasir Arafat’s leadership was quite transparent in its strategy. In a public 1996 conference, Palestinian Authority Planning Minister Nabil Sha’ath said that Israel should not dismiss any Palestinian demands since, “We will return to violence. But this time it will be with 30,000 armed Palestinian soldiers...”⁷³

While Primmerman spoke of treaty violation as an asymmetric strategy, insincere engagement is as much a threat. For more than a decade, the foundation of European

⁶⁹ Peter Slevin. “Analysts: New Strategy Courts Unseen Dangers; First Strike Could be Precedent for Other Nations.” *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2002. Pg. A1.

⁷⁰ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. The White House. March 2006. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/nss2006.pdf>

⁷¹ UN S/RES/487 (June 19, 1981).

⁷² Daniel Pipes highlighted the examples which follow in: “Assad’s Cunning Game.” *The Washington Post*. November 4, 1986.

⁷³ “...The only way to impose our conditions is inevitably through our blood.” Middle East Media Research Institute. Special Dispatch No. 132. October 6, 2000.

policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran has been critical dialogue. In a February 9, 2002 interview, EU External Affairs Commissioner Chris Patten explained, “There is more to be said for trying to engage and to draw these societies into the international community than to cut them off.”⁷⁴ European officials saw in Iranian president Muhammad Khatami a worthy partner who spoke the words they wanted to hear. Between 2000 and 2005, EU trade with Iran almost tripled. Instead of liberalizing society or curtailing its terror support, Tehran invested the resulting hard currency windfall in a clandestine nuclear program. The lesson is clear: Conditioning rogue regimes to expect reward for defiance exacerbates rather than mitigates conflict.

Despite the high-minded rhetoric of the United Nations and other international bodies, coercion—the threat of force and, if necessary, its use—will remain a critical element of U.S. foreign policy.⁷⁵ If states are to counter threats, they must remain willing to use brute force, even if it means engaging in a war of attrition or multiyear counterinsurgency. Any conflict from which a state shirks will become the asymmetric strategy of choice for its adversary. The idea that the long war can be abandoned with a turn of phrase is both naïve and dangerous.

Conclusions

While the Bush administration and its policies are unpopular through much of the world,⁷⁶ the necessity for Washington to address asymmetric threats will transcend administrations. Whereas once the Pentagon concerned itself with fulfilling the ability to fight two major wars simultaneously,⁷⁷ today it must also worry about counteracting and, if necessary, pre-empting weapons of mass destruction attacks against U.S. targets.⁷⁸ It must be prepared to face well-developed militaries—for example, to defend Taiwan against Chinese invasion—and also counter uncompromising ideologies. Distance is no longer a defense nor, as the 9/11 terrorist attack showed, is an adversary’s lack of ballistic missile capability.

There is no unified asymmetric threat, however. All states and adversaries will adjust their strategies to maximize advantage and minimize weakness. A Chinese attack on U.S. satellites, communications infrastructure, or shipping might look very different from an al-Qaeda or Hamas attack on tourists, shopping malls, or military bases.

While a dictatorship’s unity of purpose and a terrorist group’s decentralization might appear advantageous against the inefficiency of democracy, democratic governance is itself an asymmetric advantage. Few individuals relish dictatorship. Decision-making in Beijing and Moscow, Pyongyang and Havana may be streamlined, but they fear their own citizenry in a way democracies do not. Communication and lines-of-control in democracies tend to be more flexible than in terrorist groups. Democracies

⁷⁴ Jonathan Freedland. “Patten lays into Bush’s America.” *The Guardian*. February 9, 2002. www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4352929,00.html

⁷⁵ Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman. *The Dynamics of Coercion*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1-3.

⁷⁶ The Pew Global Attitudes Project. *Conflicting Views in a Divided World, 2006*. (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2006), pp. 9-15.

⁷⁷ “Defense Strategy,” in William S. Cohen. *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*. May 1997. www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr/sec3.htm. Hereafter: *QDR* (1997).

⁷⁸ *QDR* (2001), p. 3.

can fight either regularly or irregularly; terrorist groups have no such choice and, when successful, have difficulty controlling territory.

While the U.S. army today teaches that victories combine both military and political components,⁷⁹ Washington should recognize that an opponent's strategy will incorporate non-military components as well. Information warfare and influence operations should be an important component of any strategy to counter asymmetric threats. While, in the U.S. context, free speech should be absolute, politicians should recognize some responsibility for how foreign audiences interpret their words.

If there is any unifying concept that democracies might consider to counter the asymmetric threats they face, it is flexibility. If opponents eschew international norms and the laws of warfare without consequence, can Western nations afford to abide by their most liberal interpretations? Perhaps rather than hold states unilaterally to the broadest interpretations of international and humanitarian law, Western governments must calibrate their interpretations to those of their adversaries. Ironically, this is not an innovation, but rather the original intent of the Geneva Conventions.

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⁷⁹ See, for example, *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual No. 3-24. Washington: Department of the Army, 2006.