

A photograph showing several soldiers in tactical gear, including helmets and balaclavas, holding rifles. They are in a room that appears to be a training facility, with chairs and tables visible in the background. The lighting is warm and indoor.

Hostage situation training.

Reconsidering Asymmetric Warfare

100th Communications Squadron (Jeanette Copeland)

By STEVEN J. LAMBAKIS

A new security concept emerged on the American defense-planning scene several years ago. Asymmetric warfare was worked into the 1997 *National Security Strategy*. Analysts and major defense documents have since described the more vexing and menacing security challenges as *asymmetric*. The term is used in connection with threats, strategies, and warfare.

Asymmetry typically describes an enemy that thinks or acts differently from America, especially when faced with conventionally superior U.S. forces. Asymmetric threats are most often associated with nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and unfamiliar capabilities such as those displayed in the

attacks of September 11, 2001. Such weapons leverage vulnerabilities we either overlook or tolerate. And these asymmetric approaches can generate dramatic outcomes for a weaker power.

Yet this concept has lost its usefulness in part because it means different things to different people. Moreover, when joined with *warfare* or *threats*, the term *asymmetric* adds little to the strategic thinking of ages past. Observations that weak and clever enemies can bring a stronger power to its knees by exploiting vulnerabilities or can brazenly challenge muscle-bound modern militaries with a surprise use of frightening weapons or unfamiliar maneuvering simply restate the obvious: strategy matters. So what does the concept of asymmetry add to an understanding of warfare and the threat? Is it a useful defense planning or policy analysis tool in this post-Cold War, post-9/11 world?

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These are not idle questions. Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has described a variety of acute threats to the United States as asymmetric. That has been his shorthand for WMD, ballistic and cruise missiles, and terrorism. He confessed in an interview with *The New York Times* that he was at a loss to explain what this concept really meant. "I don't like it. I wish I knew an alternative. I wish I knew a better way of saying 'weapons of mass destruction.'"¹ In his frustration, it appears he intuitively reached a conclusion offered here, that the relatively young concept of asymmetry appears to have outlived its usefulness in the context of security discussions.

Making Sense of It All

Despite being militarily dominant, the United States today must prepare defenses against dissimilar enemies who are able to exploit vulnerabilities by using shadowy tactics and highly lethal weapons. These parties threaten to strike at the foundations of national security, alter the American way of life, and dumbfound the highly efficient, ultramodern Armed Forces. Asymmetry, a multifaceted, multi-dimensional concept that sought to capture these dangers, was rushed into service to help analysts make sense of it all.

The post-Cold War world is perplexing. The military dominance of the United States defines today's international power system, a reality made plain by the country's global strategy, power projection capabilities, operational expertise, force structure, defense budget, leadership responsibilities, and technological and industrial might. This unmatched power might explain a curious feature of asymmetry: it is often a synonym for anti-Americanism.

Several factors work against U.S. security despite its global dominance. Included are self-imposed constraints, those real or perceived obligations that limit Washington's ability or willingness to act militarily. Unilateral legal constraints include such measures as the Posse Comitatus Act, arms control conventions such as the Biological Weapons Convention and Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Executive order banning assassination. U.S. commanders and leaders also rigorously plan and execute operations according to the well-developed laws of armed conflict. Whereas Osama bin Laden and his supporters believe it is their duty to target civilians and that attacks against the infidel will

be rewarded, war for Americans is a measure of last resort against armed enemies for principle and in defense of interests.

Strict observance of just war doctrine and the perceived need for popular support to initiate and prosecute military action abroad also bind Washington. The American people will have less of a stomach for casualties, in other words, if they believe a military action is ill-conceived, bungled, or unjust.

We also live in a world where enemies can have very different stakes in a conflict and radically divergent measures for success. Whereas the United States may travel to a distant theater to defend national interests, its forces may be locked in battle with an enemy fighting for survival. And whereas the Pentagon may define victory as a series of battles leading to a decisive military engagement and perhaps unconditional surrender, the other side may achieve victory by merely stalling military operations, politically dividing alliances and coalitions, or humiliating the Armed Forces, as happened to U.S. Army Rangers in the streets of Mogadishu in 1993.

The asymmetry concept also includes toleration of two classes of vulnerabilities, those inherent to the national society and system of government and those that policymakers deem low risk. With respect to the first, Americans adhere rigorously to a system of legal due process and zealously guard their civil liberties. Given the demands for open society and trade, they live with porous borders, maintain a multi-ethnic society, and promote and defend access to information, technologies, and American hospitality. These factors conspire to leave public and private infrastructures open to attack from within. Concerns about how homeland security measures violate civil liberties underscore how tough a political problem this is.

Toleration of some dangers exists by policy choice. Assessments that certain vulnerabilities are low risk mean some threats are given a low priority in defense planning. For years, Washington tolerated vulnerability to ballistic missile attack, a trend President George Bush reversed with his pledge to deploy a defense against all ranges of ballistic missiles to protect the United States, its troops, and its allies and friends. U.S. leaders continue to tolerate the susceptibility of satellite constellations to attack or operational disruption.

The Nation also faces multiple threats from enemies spread across the globe. Contingencies can arise unexpectedly, and planners must prepare to defend interests or prosecute war against a wide range of groups, some of which are stateless and may have access to highly lethal weapons. There also remains a significant arms and technology proliferation challenge that has given life

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to what one might call the democratization of destruction.

The term *asymmetric* has also been used to characterize threats considered unconventional in other ways. Such threats are:

- unusual in our view (taking and torturing hostages)
- irregular—against the laws of armed conflict or in violation of treaties (using nuclear weapons to disrupt satellite operations)
- unmatched to our capabilities and departing from war as we understand it (flying airplanes into buildings)
- highly leveraged against our assets (using ballistic missiles and WMD)
- difficult to respond to in kind or proportionately, so responses against terrorism or guerrilla warfare seem heavy-handed.

Asymmetric threats may also be unknown or have unforeseen consequences—for example, a wide-scale biological attack that reduces an urban area to a wasteland.

Many of these threats are not aimed at physical control and do not rely on brute strength; rather they play on vulnerabilities and seek inadvertent cooperation. In significant respects, the analytical process engendered by the concept of asymmetry is nothing more than effective strategy at work between combatants.

A Definitional Quagmire

The real test of a concept is whether it can consistently enhance understanding. On the surface, asymmetry appears to address today's threats, especially among politicians who typically use sweeping rhetoric. The term is used prevalently, so the presumption is that it has meaning. It reflects the world's shades of gray and shifting threats. It also speaks to national vulnerabilities and lack of preparedness and is thus politically useful.

Yet the analytical utility of the term is less certain when a definition cannot be reached. Asymmetric approaches, according to some, involve acting in unexpected ways or presenting enemy leaders with capabilities and situations they are unable or unwilling to respond to. Such approaches represent ways of coping with superior American power and achieving equality. Others think of it as a way of "acting, organizing, and thinking differently [to] maximize one's own advantage, exploit an opponent's weaknesses, attain the initiative, or gain greater freedom of action."² Does this sound familiar to students of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu?

One may use asymmetry to address threat types: homeland vulnerability, WMD, ballistic and cruise missiles, and terrorism. Or perhaps one means unconventional attacks against the homeland. In any case, the defender cannot simply engage an army, navy, or air force. Asymmetry can thus describe any threat, tactic, or approach deemed unfair, unorthodox, surprising, equalizing, urgent, unfamiliar, or unimaginable.

At this point one may be accused of quibbling. After all, the above uses roughly coincide with our understanding of what is asymmetric. Yet it is also true that all successful deceptions share in the truth. Our concept obsession is a potential barrier to clear thought and consequently to sound planning. We analyze to make sense of reality. Based on available evidence and assumptions, we ask what threats or risks exist and how they should be prioritized. What should be the responses, and how should we carry them out? What strategies and tactics and what equipment and weapons should the country have? Can the concept of asymmetry help answer these questions?

Asymmetry boils down to recognizing difference, since to be asymmetric is to be different. Yet differences lie at the heart of international life. History and geography have rewarded or punished polities unevenly. Moreover, states can be distinguished because of their legal and political characteristics.

Heterogeneity permeates the military universe and yields strikingly dissimilar military cultures. Threats from enemies who think in unorthodox ways and resort to surprising tactics are as old as warfare. Sun Tzu's 500 B.C. *The Art of War* taught that, "as flowing water avoids the heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strength and strikes weakness. . . . All warfare . . . is based on deception."³

The United States has historically been familiar with asymmetric foes. During the French and Indian wars and the battles for independence against Great Britain in the 1770s and 1780s, the colonists resorted to unconventional tactics to defeat the highly disciplined British forces. Nor were Union and Confederate soldiers symmetrically matched in the Civil War. Indeed, the United States has fought in many unequal contests in the Western Hemisphere and in Asia over the past two centuries. Which facts of military life, patterns of human behavior, and features of the world does asymmetry set in sharp relief?

Now consider that definitions are the analyst's basic tools. The art of discerning differences and similarities is the basis of thought. To define

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55th Signal Company (Jerry T. Combes)

Searching for
Taliban members
in Afghanistan.

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something is to determine its essential qualities and meaning, which distinguish it from other things. Socrates observed that the “methods of division and collection” are “instruments that enable me to speak and to think.”⁴ The more sharply we render the things we discuss and debate, the better we understand what sets them apart.

One way to look at whether the concept of asymmetry adds to or detracts from powers of discrimination is to see whether it is central in planning.

Is the concept reflected in how we organize, plan, or fight? There is good reason to believe it is irrelevant in these processes. While asymmetry is peppered throughout the September 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, for example, an examination of the table of contents and report headings

suggests that it was not an organizing principle for the authors. A country can make elaborate defense plans and mobilize to defeat a biological weapon threat, terrorists, or ballistic missiles, but can it organize to defeat asymmetric threats?

Clearly not, since without further interrogation the subject matter is not distinguishable.

Can asymmetry help categorize threat types? Yes, but once we consider everything that has been defined as asymmetric, we once again must scratch our temples and wonder how useful this exercise really is. Terrorism, sabotage, insurgencies, use of ballistic and cruise missiles, information warfare techniques, nuclear explosions in space, violence against the environment, WMD, and antisatellite or antiship weapons have all been said to pose asymmetric threats to the United States and its interests. It is hard to deny that the asymmetric basket of threats is large and growing. Perhaps it is more productive to ask which threats are not asymmetric.

Weapons of mass destruction are almost universally considered the archetypal asymmetric weapon for their perceived ability to achieve a disproportionate effect that may have a catastrophic outcome on strategic balances. Yet is not the appearance of such weapons merely a function of technological discovery? These weapons become asymmetric in the hands of enemies, but to what benefit in understanding?

Iraqi counterterrorism soldiers searching for weapons.



U.S. Marine Corps (Benjamin Joaquin Flores)

There is evidence throughout history that innovations in weapons and tactics profoundly affect the balance of power. The introduction of cavalry spurred the fall of the Roman Empire. The crossbow and longbow allowed commoners to challenge knights on horseback. The telegraph and railway gave Union forces an unmatched communication and logistic advantage in the Civil War, much as U.S. dominance of space and satellite communication granted a favorable climate to wage war against Iraq in 1991. The observation that new instruments of war and tactics introduce asymmetries and can give one side an advantage is not very insightful. To be sure, reactions to those new weapons and tactics will occur as actors on all sides endeavor to regain the advantage by introducing new asymmetries.

Besides reminding planners that enemies will use different or unfair tactics or employ unconventional weapons, the use of asymmetry in security discussions can confound analysis by insisting on nonsensical distinctions and oversimplified conclusions. For example, when we are told that a Chinese antisatellite weapon capability would be a “useful asymmetrical means” of disabling U.S. satellites, does that mean we can also find a “symmetrical” way? What might that be? Asymmetry’s loose definition may lead to distinctions that are logical but that on closer examination appear rather foolish. If there is not a symmetrical side to our understanding, can a meaningful asymmetrical side exist?

Welcome Back Sun Tzu

“When I have won a victory,” said Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*, “I do not repeat my tactics but respond to circumstances in an infinite variety of ways.”⁵

Strategy—what a concept! Target an enemy’s weaknesses, avoid his strengths, surprise him, master the indirect approach—this has been the stuff of victory throughout history. The goal of a strategist has always been to win the upper hand by leveling the playing field when one’s side is disadvantaged and to prevent the opponent from gaining an operational or tactical advantage. So why do we believe we need a new concept that describes how an enemy will approach us to do us harm?

Asymmetry did not come into focus until the United States was well into its effort to understand the post-Cold War security environment. One could reasonably assume that its rise is linked to the disappearance of the intellectual construct adopted to keep the peace during the Cold War standoff.

Between 1945 and 1991, the nuclear-age *cognoscenti* and makers of opinion and policy redefined strategy to suit unprecedented security circumstances. In a radical departure from the classical understanding, all things strategic became inextricably identified with nuclear weapons and East-West warfare. The principal organizing strategy permeating U.S. planning circles was mutual assured destruction (MAD), a strikingly symmetrical and historically surreal way to

consider war. For decades we deliberately sought nuclear parity with the Soviet Union through arms control. This symmetrical strategy meant central reliance on a possible outcome of nuclear annihilation for both sides.

Washington found at the end of the Cold War that mutual annihilation meant reliance on principles that were not easily transferred from one security era to the next. So while MAD may have prevented the next hot war (although the world came perilously close to nuclear disaster in October 1962), it is now obviously inappropriate in a world of multiple enemies, where decision-

makers in hostile and friendly regimes cannot be deemed to be uniformly predictable and rational. It was not prudent, in other words, to have a MAD relationship with Saddam Hus-

sein. Total war dominated yesterday's security debates; today we strive to fathom wars that are unnervingly limited and that madden us with their unconventionality.

MAD proponents believed that safety could only be assured through plans calling for the immediate and apocalyptic use of brute force against an enemy on the outbreak of large-scale hostilities, and they knew the likelihood of massive retaliation. We lived by a creed: whatever buried us would bury them. Over and over came warnings that a nuclear war must never be fought because it could never be won. That made the failure of deterrence inconceivable.⁶ We could have strategies for deterrence and arms

control but not for military triumph. Victory was at bottom a deeply troubling thought. Where in all of this could one hope to find a method and philosophy for winning?

The emergence of asymmetry as a security concept coincided with a collective attempt to recover intellectually from an extreme strategy of inflicting widespread and indiscriminate destruction. Yet what was really lacking was strategic awareness. The essence of military strategy endows warfare "with intelligent properties that raise it above the brute application

of force."⁷ Properly understood, it recognizes a path to victory (or achievement of objectives), and that path may lead through the thickets of combat. Asymmetry, as has been seen, sounds like strategy insofar as it embodies action concepts that leverage unpredictability, indirectness, and unorthodoxy and recognizes possible victory of the weak over the strong.

The focus on victory against those who endanger American lives, liberties, and way of life motivates defense policymakers and planners in the post-MAD world. They have certain knowledge that they face enemies who would "use the forums of liberty to destroy liberty itself,"⁸ who are malicious and ruthless, crafty and subversive, unorthodox and monumentally "unfair" in their tactics. Today, sturdy defenses and a doctrine of preemptive strike make far more sense. The Nation understands the need to be prepared to fight and win against an enemy that operates according to strange terms of warfare.

The Armed Forces employ unconventionality and unpredictability to upset, disorient, or otherwise weaken an enemy's forces and plans. By turning weakness into strength, they can compel an enemy to give up its political purpose. B.H. Liddell Hart wrote in his classic exposition:

Effective results in war have rarely been attained unless the approach has had such indirectness as to ensure the opponent's unreadiness to meet it. The indirectness has usually been physical, and always psychological. In strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home. . . . To move along the line of natural expectation consolidates the opponent's balance and thus increases his resisting power. In war, as in wrestling, the attempt to throw the opponent without loosening his foothold and upsetting his balance results in self-exhaustion, increasing in disproportionate ratio to the effective strain put upon him.⁹

This begs the question of how discerning we are if we are amazed by what once passed for common sense. With strategy (as traditionally understood) on sabbatical and our attention so absurdly (though necessarily) focused on a single and equally powerful enemy for half a century, asymmetry arrived at the end of Cold War competition as strategy's impostor. It came replete with a somewhat dubious though vaguely convincing language and analytical framework for understanding threats and the new security environment.

Reading about asymmetric warfare, one typically envisions a decision by one side to not assault the other's army, navy, or air force head-on. Yet it is a sin against strategy in any given battle for one force, large or small, to be perfectly predictable by pairing off even imperfectly with an enemy. Such cases have had tragic outcomes. In

total war dominated yesterday's security debates; today we strive to fathom wars that are unnervingly limited



Propaganda poster found in Afghanistan.

World War I, for example, the symmetrical strategy and operational plans that led to force-on-force tactical engagements in the trenches left the practitioners of war with a barbaric method of combat as the only option for success. A perfect symmetry in opposing forces means that the brains of those forces are acting in a monumentally nonstrategic manner. All strategy works on asymmetries, so asymmetric warfare is representative of all rationally executed warfare.

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The present obsession with asymmetric threats is evidence of the very banality of our musings on the post-Cold War security environment and on the dynamic forces and counterforces fed into U.S. security policy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, American mental reflexes were unresponsive to the memories of strategy's eternal logic as it had been revealed in the martial contests of the past. Asymmetry was there to fill the resulting void.

Reconsidering a Catchphrase

As Colin Gray noted, "A problem with popular formulas can be that their familiarity breeds an unwarranted confidence in interpretation."¹⁰ The same may be said of popular jargon. While the concept of asymmetry appeared on the scene to bring coherence to planning in a world of multiple, diverse threats and complex international interactions, one could readily conclude that it has done neither. Asymmetry is classically general; its very ubiquity renders it irrelevant.

There is an analogy here with the word *cancerous*. To call something cancerous is to not say much that is meaningful without clarification from a physician. Cancer of the what? Is it benign or malignant? Is there a cure? What are the recovery timelines? How long does one have to live? Only with answers to these questions can one put order into his life and prioritize what is important in light of new circumstances. Similarly, one cannot know much about anything asymmetric without delving into its context.

We have hung onto the term in part because it allows us to presume that we have tied the world's complicating factors into our thoughts and discussions. It helps express certain ideas and sounds erudite. But it also lives on because users and readers alike have been less than critical.

It is said that the beginning of wisdom is the proper understanding of things. We understand today that some things are different from yesterday. We face a series of dangers in Afghanistan,

Iraq, and globally with the threat of WMD, ballistic missiles, and al Qaeda-brand terrorism. America's defense leadership has taken steps to ensure that the Armed Forces retain their own asymmetric battlefield advantages through the transformation process. Homeland security is now the watchword and is responsible for the most far-reaching U.S. Government reorganization since Harry Truman. It is also clear that we have to think outside the box. We face adversaries who are committed to looking for and exploiting our defense seams. The baseline concept adopted to explain this reality is asymmetry.

Yet asymmetry's most profound contribution to analysis is as a reminder that today's world is different. There is evidence that this term is nothing more than a Beltway buzzword that is nearing the end of its life. Secretary Rumsfeld's observation must give one pause. While the term was used extensively in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, it does not appear in the September 2002 National Security Strategy—a rather odd omission if the concept is of any use in explaining our world. We have come full circle from 1997.

Owing to its analytical shortcomings and the need for a strong sense of priority in defense planning, this concept will fade rapidly from defense jargon. Meanwhile, if we are going to use this term, we should explain what we mean. Yet if we must spend too much time explaining, perhaps we should not use it at all.

JFQ

NOTES

¹ "Interview with Donald H. Rumsfeld," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2002.

² Steven Metz and Douglas V. Johnson II, *Asymmetry and U.S. Military Strategy: Definition, Background, and Strategic Concepts* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, January 2001), pp. 5, 6.

³ Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, translated by Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 82.

⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Samuel B. Griffen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 100.

⁵ See Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2002), and Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher at War*, translated by Christine Booker and Norman Stone (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 160.

⁶ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, second revised edition (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 17.

⁷ George W. Bush, remarks by the President to U.S. Attorneys Conference, Washington, Dwight David Eisenhower Office Building, November 29, 2001.

⁸ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, pp. 66, 134.

⁹ Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, p. 25.

¹⁰ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 21.