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ASYMMETRIC WARFARE: WHERE THE WEAK ARE STRONG AND THE STRONG ARE WEAK

A b s t r a c t

This article examines several aspects of how so-called asymmetric warfare was organized and waged during the 20th century. It then goes on to show how the forms and methods used by international

terrorist structures to wage asymmetric warfare have changed in light of the intensive and contradictory globalization processes going on since the beginning of the 21st century.

KEYWORDS: *Asymmetric warfare, international terrorist organizations, guerilla warfare.*

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The end of the 20th-beginning of the 21st centuries were marked by tectonic changes in the geopolitical structure of the world caused by the end of the Cold War. The relatively clear bipolar configuration of this period has begun to gradually give way to much more complicated relations in the multipolar and poly-civilizational world that is taking shape. All of this has given rise to qualitatively new forms and methods of armed struggle on the international arena in the form of different modifications of so-called asymmetric warfare.¹

Asymmetry in the Guerilla Warfare and Terrorist Acts of the 20th Century

The world has seen quite a large number of asymmetric wars and armed conflicts throughout its history, particular in the past two centuries. It will suffice to mention only a few of them: the Spanish war against Napoleon's occupation troops at the beginning of the 19th century, the Caucasian war of 1817-1864, the Polish uprisings of 1830 and 1863 against czarist Russia, and the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

¹ See: "A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," in: *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2001; I. Arreguin, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations, 2004.

Asymmetric warfare was manifested in the boldest relief during the numerous anti-colonial wars that raged in several Asian countries, particularly in the two Anglo-Afghan wars of 1838-1842 and 1878-1881. Despite the clear imbalance of forces between the regular English troops and irregular Afghan contingents, these clashes demonstrated relatively high proficiency in waging so-called small wars.² Something similar was also seen at the beginning of the 20th century, during World War I in the combat operations of the British-supported Arab tribes against the Turkish troops in the Arabian deserts.³

Elements of asymmetric warfare were also demonstrated during the numerous anti-colonial uprisings in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, as well as in the combat guerilla operations against the German occupation troops in Europe during World War II. Particular mention in this respect should be made of the operations in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the war for independence in Algeria in 1954-1962, the hostilities in Southeast Asia from the end of the 1950s to 1975, the Afghan war of 1979-1989, the Chechen war of the 1990s in Russia, the continuing warfare the Taliban waged against NATO-led coalition forces in Afghanistan (since 2001), and several others.

To these can be added the heinous acts committed by various terrorist organizations and movements in Russia, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, Turkey, Pakistan, and India, to name a few, during the 20th century that have wreaked havoc both in the leading nations of the world and the government structures of certain states. Guerilla warfare also constituted an important component of the overall full-scale warfare waged by regular armed forces. This was the case in the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 and during the national-liberation war in China during the 1930-1940s. It is no accident that Mao Zedong stressed in particular that "considering the revolutionary war as a whole, the operations of the people's guerrillas and those of the main forces of the Red Army complement each other like a man's right arm and left arm, and if we had only the main forces of the Red Army without the people's guerrillas, we would be like a warrior with only one arm."⁴

In the middle of last century, French political scientist and sociologist Raymond Aron emphasized in his fundamental work *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* that the great nations were defeated in the colonial wars of the 20th century due to the asymmetry in "insurgent-colonizer" relations. Apart from having unequal forces, Raymond Aron also pointed to the asymmetry in will, interest, and antipathy in the polemics between the insurgents and colonizers.⁵

In 1975, British international relations expert Andrew Mack first introduced the term "asymmetric conflict" into scientific circulation in an article entitled "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict" published in *World Politics* and analyzing the U.S. war in Vietnam, as well as a series of other defeats suffered by developed countries in Indonesia, Algeria, Cyprus, Aden, Morocco, and Tunisia.⁶ Andrew Mack came to the conclusion that during asymmetric conflicts, the side with the overwhelming superiority in traditional military force is in no way guaranteed victory. Even though strong countries may not have suffered a perceptible military defeat in most conflicts of this kind, they have nevertheless suffered defeat in the political sense, being unable to impose their will on the enemy. So such wars become pointless.

In these conflicts, the political victory of the weak side is ensured not by its ability to defeat a strong enemy, but by its ability to undermine the strong adversary's will to continue the fight and

² See: N.A. Khalfin, *Proval britanskoi agressii v Afganistane (XIX v.—nachalo XX v.)*, Socioeconomic Literature Publishing House, Moscow, 1959, available at [<http://militera.lib.ru/h/halfin/index.html>].

³ See: B.H. Liddell Hart, *Polkovnik Lawrens*, State Military Publishers of the Soviet People's Commissariat of Defense, Moscow, 1939, pp. 94-102 (English edition: B.H. Liddell Hart, *T.E. Lawrence in Arabia and After*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1934).

⁴ Mao Zedong, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War" (December 1936), in: *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 238 available at [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_12.htm].

⁵ See: R. Aron, *Mir i voina mezhdunarodami*, NOTA BENE, Moscow, 2000, pp. 84-86.

⁶ See: A. Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1975.

force it to cease the struggle before it has achieved its set goals. Asymmetric means of warfare, in particular guerilla warfare, have proven the most effective way to achieve this. On the whole, two tactics of asymmetric warfare have been developed in such armed conflicts—the tactics of organized guerilla warfare and the tactics of individual terror.⁷ It should be added that both of these tactics are often used together, mutually supplementing each other. The operations of different kinds of guerilla and terrorist groups can be used as examples—“fronts,” “movements,” “parties,” “contingents,” “brigades,” “liberation armies,” “revolutionary armed forces,” “self-defense forces,” and so on in Latin America (the guerilla contingent of Ernesto Che Guevara in Bolivia, the Shining Path of Peru, the Tupamaros National Liberation Movement in Uruguay, and others) and Europe (the Red Army Faction in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, Action directe in France, the ETA in Spain, the IRA in Northern Ireland, and many more), as well as the Red Army and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, the Kurdish Workers’ Party and Gray Wolves in Turkey, Armenian terrorist organizations (ASALA and others), dozens of Islamic, whereby not only terrorist and extremist, organizations in the Middle East and other regions of the world dyed in class, religious, ethnic, separatist, and other hues.⁸

At the same time, relying on the experience of the Cuban revolution, Ernesto Che Guevara believed that “guerrilla warfare is a phase that does not afford in itself opportunities to arrive at complete victory.”⁹ It stands to reason that Che Guevara’s book *Guerilla Warfare*, which is instructive in nature, is still considered a textbook of sorts that is still pertinent for international terrorists and radical armed movements today.

Régis Debray, a French philosopher with leftist inclination, tried to sum up the theory of guerilla warfare in the 1950s-1960s by developing a theory called focalism. He believed that the actions of revolutionaries in all Latin American countries should, at least at the initial stage, be limited to armed struggle in the form of guerilla warfare exclusively in rural areas. He believed that combat action is the most convincing way to spread revolutionary ideas and that a guerilla army could grow into a genuine revolutionary party.¹⁰ Relying on the experience of the Algerian war of 1954-1962, Frantz Fanon, who idealized and absolutized the armed struggle of the peoples of North Africa, affirmed that in colonial countries only the peasantry is revolutionary and the most combative.¹¹

21st Century: From Guerilla to Asymmetric Terrorist Warfare

Contemporary asymmetric warfare is increasingly leaning toward worldwide guerilla warfare, whose era of incursion prominent Russian war theoretician Evgeny Messner warned about as early as the 1960s-1970s. He believed that a World Revolution (guerilla warfare) was born and grew in the two world wars and many different local wars of the 20th century, in which warfare became entwined with insurrection and insurrection with warfare, and a new form of armed conflict was created in which the fighters were not only and not so much regular armed forces as national movements.¹²

⁷ See: “Asimmetriia v vooruzhennom protivoborstve” (Part 2), *Voenno-politicheskoe obozrenie*, 29 August, 2012, available at [<http://www.belupo.com/ru/15441.html>].

⁸ See: M.P. Trebin, *Terrorizm v XXI veke*, Kharvest, Minsk, 2003, pp. 156-157, 367-398.

⁹ E. Che Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare*, 1961, p. 4, available at [<http://1-media-cdn.foolz.us/ffuuka/board/tg/image/1378/48/1378489307983.pdf>].

¹⁰ See: R. Debray, *Re'volution dans la re'volution? La lutte arme'e et politique en Ame'rique Latine*, Paris, 1967, pp. 53-68.

¹¹ See: F. Fanon, *Les damne's de la terre*, Paris, 1961, p. 46.

¹² See: E. Messner, *Vsemirnaia miatezhevoina*, Moscow, 2004.

As early as the beginning of the 1970s, Western military experts thought the most effective way to combat the insurgent movement was to prevent it from becoming organized and to have at least ten times more fighters than the insurgents.¹³

In the present century, classical terrorism has become a version of asymmetric warfare and replaced the guerilla warfare that long performed this function in the 20th century. Terrorism differs from the guerilla wars of the last century in its offensive nature, its lower level of dependence on the local population, and its ability to make active use of the infrastructure of the developed countries for its own purposes.¹⁴

The difference between guerilla warfare and terrorist strategies is the deliberate use by the latter of advantages of strategic asymmetry. Traditional guerilla movements strove to achieve symmetry in relations with the enemy and then defeat it in an armed struggle. Terrorist groups, on the other hand, strive to undermine the moral and psychological potential of the enemy without coming into direct combat contact with it.¹⁵ The widespread international al-Qa'eda network is the most graphic example of waging asymmetric warfare using terrorist methods.

Today it is obvious that by the beginning of the 21st century, this new type of asymmetric warfare had become the dominant form of armed conflict, also called sixth generation warfare, distinguished by a striking imbalance between the economic and military-technical capabilities of the opposing sides. This warfare has no clear front line. Regular army ground units mainly carry out passive functions, such as defense and blockade operations. Active maneuvers in enemy territory, beginning with the destruction of major military facilities and ending with the capture or removal of political and military leaders, are most often carried out by special forces detachments. The primary feature of this warfare is its asymmetric nature—conflict with an unequal correlation of forces (David fighting Goliath), in which the stronger side does not win very often. In asymmetric warfare, the weaker side is most often the actual winner, unless it is completely destroyed that is.¹⁶ The main goal of asymmetric warfare is to find vulnerabilities in the enemy's military strength, discover its weak points, and draw every possible strategic advantage from this.

Another specific characteristic of asymmetric warfare is that all of the opposing sides do not recognize international law agreements—the Hague and Geneva on the Laws of War, on the Treatment of Prisoners of War and Hostages, and on the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts. One other distinction of such warfare is that it is usually accompanied by a high death toll among the peaceful population.

International policy has tried to keep in mind the specifics of asymmetric conflicts throughout the whole of the second half of the 20th century. States primarily tried to modify the strategy of combat operations, paying attention to the special features of warfare against relatively weak adversaries, which included drawing up scenarios of limited direct military clashes, training armed forces to conduct combat operations with small contingents of specially trained troops, carrying out preventive action against irregular enemy units and using information gathered by reconnaissance groups and agent networks, implementing measures to ensure contact with the local population, and rendering military and material support to groups of supporters in the local community. In our day and age, the combat operations of NATO's antiterrorist forces against the Taliban in Afghanistan are a good example of asymmetric warfare.

In turn, today, ways to wage asymmetric warfare assimilated and practiced by different international terrorist groups differ from the generally accepted classical forms of full-scale wars and local

¹³ See: E. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays*, London, 1973, p. 167.

¹⁴ See: H. Münkler, "Terrorism segodnia. Voina stanovitsia asimmetrichnoi," *International Politik*, No. 1, 2004, pp. 4, 6.

¹⁵ See: L.V. Deriglazova, "Paradoks asimmetrii v mezhdunarodnom konflikte," available at [<http://www.intertrends.ru/nineth/007.htm>].

¹⁶ See: A. Poltorakov, "David i Goliaf: geostrategiia asimmetrichnykh voyn," available at [<http://weandworld.ru/defence/554-david-i-goliaf-geostrategiya-asimmetrichnyx-vojn.html>].

armed conflicts waged by previous generations in their clandestine political motivations and in their practice of making surprise, unmotivated and targeted strikes using new and often unexpected means and forms of violence. This has a stupefying effect, as well as taking an inadmissible human toll and inflicting significant material damage accompanied by mass psychological shock. Nor are there any customary, clearly marked front lines or visual contact with the “phantom” enemy. Asymmetric warfare is essentially a geopolitical technique of contemporary international terrorism without a territorial framework. Terrorist acts can be carried out anywhere and at any time. The weaker sides in the conflicts understand that the greatest damage, particularly in present-day conditions, can be inflicted by making strikes on the most vulnerable targets. So this is why unprotected civilian targets are often subject to attack instead of sufficiently well-protected military facilities. A paradoxical phenomenon is being observed: the greater the world’s (primarily the West’s) technical and technological development, the more vulnerable it becomes.¹⁷

It is no accident that the leading world nations have been paying keen attention to asymmetric warfare in the last decade and looking for an antidote to this method of warfare. A report titled *Joint Vision 2020* drawn up by the U.S. Department of Defense in 2000 notes that “The asymmetric methods and objectives of an adversary are often far more important than the relative technological imbalance, and the psychological impact of an attack might far outweigh the actual physical damage inflicted.” “An adversary may pursue an asymmetric advantage on the tactical, operational, or strategic level by identifying key vulnerabilities and devising asymmetric concepts and capabilities to strike or exploit them,” the report goes on to say.¹⁸ This was all essentially demonstrated in the U.S. itself on 11 September, 2001.

In 2006, a subdivision with the working name of Asymmetric Warfare Group was created in the Pentagon, the main task of which was to carry out in-depth research of this phenomenon and draw up techniques and ways to counter asymmetric threats to U.S. national security. It also studied the asymmetric warfare methods the U.S. army had already encountered during its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and carried out inferential research of possible ways of waging asymmetric warfare.¹⁹

Some of the main characteristics of asymmetric conflicts are the unpredictable outcome with a clear imbalance of capabilities and statuses of the opposing forces; use by the weak party of a strategy that seeks out the “vulnerabilities of the stronger;” use by the weak party of prohibited means of warfare; the tactic of “indirect” combat operations used by the weak party; and the inability of the strong party to defend its position and ultimately crush the weak party. In recent years, suicide bombers have become a much more frequent phenomenon, which is making it much harder for the law-enforcement forces to eliminate terrorist threats. This is especially true since it is frequently people with a specific personality type who are inclined to carry out terrorist acts. They are distinguished by highly active minds, prominent leader qualities, inability to compromise, and contempt for material values and comfort. They are usually members of the anti-elite (according to Vilfredo Pareto), who are unable to occupy a high post, but have a large amount of psychic energy, decisiveness, and contempt for danger and death. In some cases, these qualities verge on mental disorder and could become pathological. But statistics show that most people who are professionally engaged in terrorism do not suffer from clinical mental deviations. The difficulty of the task to be performed requires an extremely rational and stable way of behavior. Terrorists have no appreciation of life, nor do they rec-

¹⁷ See: V.I. Slipchenko, *Voyny shestogo pokoleniia. Oruzhie i voennoe iskusstvo budushchego*, Veche, Moscow, 2002, p. 45; “Asimmetria v vooruzhennom protivoborstve” (Part 1), 27 August 2012, available at [belvpo.com/ru/15326.html]; N. Komleva, A. Borisov, “Asimmetrichnye voiny—geopoliticheskaia tekhnologiia sovremennogo terrorizma,” *Obozrevatel*, Nos. 11-12, 2002.

¹⁸ *Joint Vision 2020*, Approved by General Henry H. Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Published by U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., June 2000, p. 5, available at [http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/doctrine/genesis_and_evolution/source_materials/joint_vision_2020.pdf].

¹⁹ See: “The Pentagon is Studying Asymmetric War,” available in Russian at [http://www.csef.ru/index.php/ru/oborona-i-bezopasnost/project/348-novoe-v-voennom-dele/1-stati/918-the-pentagon-is-studying-asymmetric-war].

ognize the difference between life and death. This is shown in their attitude not only to other people's, but also to their own life. And this is why there are so many religious fanatics, sectarians, and mystics among terrorists.²⁰

On the whole, this kind of warfare is usually not associated with the revolutionary innovations in the warfare carried out by the leading nations of the world in the so-called non-contact warfare of the last few decades. The means used in terrorist acts are sufficiently compact and mobile. Whereby this type of warfare is frequently an expression of protest by those civilizational communities that are against the increasingly widespread globalization of the modern world.

Moreover, we should also keep in mind the important fact that some countries and entire regions are ready and striving to enter the globalization process to different degrees. For different historical reasons—political isolation or self-isolation, their technological and economic capabilities, ingrained autarchic traditions inherited from the past and their specific centuries-long spiritual values—many countries are on the periphery of the global processes. Due to the extremely high rate of present-day globalization, the gap between the few countries and regions spearheading globalization (and these are the countries that belong to the G-8) and the majority of those lagging behind is becoming more noticeable with each passing year. And this cannot help but add to the tension between them. It is no accident that even before globalization began, German geopolitician Carl Schmitt concentrated all of his attention on the symbolic figure of the “guerilla.” In his interpretation, the guerilla fighter is the last character in world history to remain faithful to his initial calling, in spite of the watering down of civilization and the dilution of its continental values. And it is he who is protecting in every possible way the tellurocratic order in the face of the all-out attack of the Western thalassocratic world, elaborating in so doing its fundamental principles of warfare ethics, which differ dramatically from its traditional forms of conduct.²¹

The various forms of asymmetric warfare waged by international terrorism forces are aimed at wreaking havoc and causing universal fear in the world community, leading to a “war of each against all.” The asymmetric warfare being waged by the East against the West is a kind of response to globalization, which is first becoming Westernization, then Americanization. Moreover, while the world financial and economic crisis that has been going on for several years now is primarily the geo-economic underside of globalization, asymmetric warfare is its so-called military and political underside.²²

Conclusion

The leading nations of the world often use asymmetric warfare as a way to wage armed struggle for achieving their far-reaching geopolitical goals—exporting instability to “unfriendly countries,” destabilizing enormous regions in order to weaken the influence of rival nations in them, launching arms races, and carrying out internal mobilization of their own society.

Transnational terrorism is increasingly acquiring the ominous features of an entirely new socio-political global phenomenon—geoterrorism. It is the brainchild of 21st-century geopolitics, in which there is very little difference in the way both international terrorist structures and the antiterrorist coalitions opposing them are waging war. It is enough to take a look at the military-political processes going on in several hotspots on the planet.

In turn, the unbridled and often clearly imbalanced reaction to terrorist acts (several thousand victims in the West and hundreds of thousands in the East and South) could provoke an adequate

²⁰ See: A.G. Dugin, “Geopolitika asimmetrichnykh ugroz: voyny postmoderna,” available at [<http://konservatizm.org/konservatizm/geopolitika/191010163416.xhtml>].

²¹ See: Iu.V. Tikhonravov, *Geopolitika, ZAO Biznes-shkola “Intel-Sintenz,”* Moscow, 1998, p. 178.

²² See: A. Poltorakov, op. cit.

reaction from the competing geopolitical forces of the East and South with unpredictable consequences for the whole of mankind. Against the background of the threat of Huntington's "clash of civilizations," this could lead to the emergence of a new even wider spread "trans-civilizational" version of international terrorism.

And as Russian military expert Vladimir Slipchenko rightly points out, corresponding asymmetric assets and forces are needed to oppose international terrorism, which has demonstrated the ability to develop, organize, and wage asymmetric warfare. Joint, including under the aegis of the U.N. and other major international organizations, operations among states to fight the assets and forces of international terrorism are also important. Here we have the vast untapped organizational potential of international legal, technological, information, financial, military, civil, and other types, forms, and means of interstate collaboration.²³ Tapping this potential is becoming all the more vital as the threat of international terrorist groups using different increasingly sophisticated techniques of information and psychological warfare and environmental diversions, as well as different types of nuclear-, chemical-, and bacteriological-packed "instruments," etc., created during the continuing scientific-technical revolution in warfare, becomes ever more real.

²³ See: V. Slipchenko, "Asimmetrichnye voyny," available at [viperson.ru/wind.php?ID=432672&soch].
