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ASYMMETRY IN WARFARE

Asymmetric threats have been central to recent security debates around the world. The events of the last decade are evidence of a distinct rise in asymmetric threats to stability. Therefore, there is value in examining exactly what is meant by asymmetric threats. At the outset it should be noted that asymmetric threats are an enduring aspect of warfare and not a new phenomenon.

Contemporary literature is replete with references to asymmetric warfare, asymmetric challenges, asymmetric threats and asymmetric tactics. However, the term asymmetry is used to indicate a very broad spectrum of activities in conflict.

The Macquarie Dictionary defines asymmetric as 'not symmetrical; without symmetry'. Symmetry is defined as 'the correspondence, in size, form, an arrangement, or parts on opposite sides of a plane, line or point; regularity of form or arrangement with reference to corresponding parts.' US joint doctrine provides an explanation as applicable to warfare as, 'symmetric engagements [are] battles between similar forces where superior correlation of forces and technological advantage are important to ensure victory and minimize losses'. It also states, 'Asymmetric engagements are battles between dissimilar forces'. The US doctrinal explanation implies that asymmetry is largely applicable at the operational level.

The new RAAF F/A-18F with AGM-154C Joint Stand-Off Weapon

Asymmetry is a principle characteristic of irregular warfare. Irregular groups, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, use asymmetry to avoid the strengths of an opposing conventional force while exploiting its potential vulnerabilities. These asymmetric actions involve the selective use of weapons and tactics to constrain regular military operations and to counter and defeat an adversary who is numerically and/or technologically superior.

Technological asymmetry is pronounced when a major power is in conflict with a relatively smaller power or an irregular adversary. For example, in the Matabele War (Africa) in 1893-94, in one engagement 50 soldiers of the British colonial forces fought off 5000 local warriors with just four Maxim guns. This was pure technological asymmetry. Asymmetry can also be a product of the cognitive domain. For example, in order to neutralise the superiority of a conventional force, irregular adversaries regularly employ asymmetric tactics. This is highly evident in how irregular forces such as the Taliban have opposed international forces in recent operations in Afghanistan.

Asymmetry was accepted as part of warfare by Sun Tzu around 250 BC. He observed that one engages in battle with the orthodox and 'gains victory through the unorthodox'. Throughout history there have been many examples of 'lesser' adversaries employing asymmetry to compensate for obvious mismatch in their capabilities compared to their opponents. The long history of warfare on the American frontier is but one example, with the Apache Wars in the second half of the 19th century a particular case in point. In the Second South African War (1899-1902), the adoption of guerilla tactics by Boer commandos was a direct and deliberate response to an inability to match the British Army in conventional operations. By this means the Boer defenders, who never exceeded 45 000 at any time, succeeded in resisting an opposing force half a million strong for two and a half years.

The employment of British air power in Iraq during the 1920s to control the local population is a classic example

of the use of conventional forces in an asymmetric manner. In modern times, asymmetric tactics have been even more evident. The use of RAAF Lincoln bombers in Malaya to quell a Communist uprising is a good example of the employment of technological asymmetry. On the other hand, the Viet Cong tactics in the Vietnam War is an example of the use of conceptual asymmetry to counter western technological superiority.

The RAAF Heron Remotely Piloted Aircraft deployed to Afghanistan

The 11 September 2011 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon are classic and tangible examples of asymmetry. The scale of destruction of these attacks has raised fears of irregular groups carrying out even more devastating asymmetric attacks using nuclear, biological or chemical weapons of mass destruction.

The Western concept of operations in current conflicts, such as in Afghanistan, is a demonstration of the asymmetric application of air power in combating an irregular adversary. The combination of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), precision strike, control of the air and air mobility exploiting air power's inherent characteristics of reach, speed, perspective and flexibility provides the coalition forces in Afghanistan with distinct advantages. Air power's ISR capabilities create a particularly strong and effective asymmetric advantage in irregular warfare. Similarly, air mobility provides rapid manoeuvrability that permits the engagement of a ground-based adversary's vulnerabilities at a time and place of one's own choosing. It is no surprise that the Taliban considers air power as a great threat as evidenced by a Taliban Commander's statement quoted below. Likewise, the Taliban's effective information operations plan developed to discredit allied air power by highlighting collateral damage incidents could be interpreted as a key psychological asymmetric measure to combat the allied air power and technological superiority.

While the current Western experience is associated with operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, other instances of the use of asymmetry in conflict can be identified. For example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam demonstrated considerable innovative thought in employing aircraft to strike Sri Lankan military and government infrastructure between 2007 and 2009. Similarly, Ivory Coast military forces sought technological asymmetry by the use of mercenary controlled Israeli Remotely Piloted Aircraft for pre-strike ISR and Belorussian Su-25 for the actual strike missions against internal rebels in 2004.

Few could argue with Secretary of Defence Gates' statement that 'we can expect that asymmetric warfare will be the mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time'. Non-national and trans-national groups are now becoming major players in conflict and the operating environment is becoming increasingly complex and ambiguous. The battlespace is increasingly beyond the borders of a nation-state; indeed, it is increasingly non-physical. The operating environment has become characterised by greater numbers of irregular adversaries seeking increasingly asymmetric advantages. In reality, however, this is no different to the challenges that previous military forces have faced in all wars. Asymmetry in warfare is, after all, an enduring aspect.

- *Asymmetric threats and challenges are enduring aspects of warfare and are fundamental to the conduct of irregular wars.*
- *Asymmetry can be applied through either technology or the cognitive domain.*
- *Air power often provides a technological asymmetry that can be exploited in countering irregular forces.*

Tanks and armour are not a big deal ... The planes are the killers, I can handle anything but the jet fighters.

Unclassified Taliban Statement

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