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Strategy, Military Tactics and Weapons: Asymmetric War and the New Geopolitics

By Andrew McKillop

January 27, 2014

Political and military planners spend a great deal of time and effort ‘war-gaming’ various scenarios, hoping to predict outcomes, and prepare accordingly.

This is no trivial task in the 21st century, but as history teaches, and despite the proclamations of so-called war ‘experts’ – it has never been an exact science.

The threat of war still looms behind the current geopolitical chess match, but what form will it take and who will be involved? More importantly, with the current shift towards *asymmetry*, who will prevail? Who *can* prevail?

New and Old

Even the definition of “**asymmetric war**” is controversial, because it can concern at least three drivers and methods of conflict, usually between large organized fighting forces, small paramilitary cells and remote-controlled unmanned assets.

Firstly there is the political-economic or other motivation, second the tactics, and thirdly the weapons utilised in asymmetric war – which itself is usually defined by the negative. Some writers say the term was first used by Andrew J. Mack in a 1975 book titled “Why Big Nations

Lose Small Wars”. Some military historians conversely say asymmetric war dates from Antiquity, and included the surprise outcome of larger fighting forces losing an asymmetric war with smaller insurgent, militia, terrorist or tight-knit politically motivated forces and entities in specific theaters of conflict.



Other than wars of Antiquity like the Ancient Greek **Peloponnesian War** series (image, left) which lasted about 30 years in the 5th century BC, and certainly included asymmetric war and “surprise defeats” for larger forces, the 200-year Crusader war series (about 1095-1299) had recurring battles and campaigns where asymmetric war featured, and sometimes dominated. Our problem is that certainly for a near-century from the late 19th century to about 1980-2000, the **Clausewitz Doctrine**, of “*God is with the big battalions*” held firm. This in turn can be traced to the nature as well as the goals of war following the Industrial Revolution. Drivers of change included European nation building, colonialism, mass migration, and by 1948 the later “bipolar world” of the so-called Soviet Empire opposing the Western liberal-capitalist democracies. The collapse of the USSR was naively believed to signal “the end of history and of warfare itself”.

Although not defined as an asymmetric war campaign leading to total victory by historians like Andrew Mack, the Long March of Mao Zedong, culminating in total victory in 1949, was for most of its time called “terror war” by external major powers, including the US, Japan, the UK and other European nations. This only underlines the fact that asymmetric war – for losers – is often called terrorism, but also underlines the wider tactics and strategy, and weapons used by smaller insurgent forces during an asymmetric war campaign or series. It also underlines that like the asymmetric wars of the distant past, these are generally long series of wars, not set-piece or short-term frontline battlefield warfare.

Strategy and Tactics

Strategy above all means command-and-control because decisive gains and losses need close combat at some stage – for any type of war excluding set-piece formal warfare of the pre-Cold War type or paradigm.



Cold War: An early days image of the Berlin Blockade in 1948-49.

The Cold War “bipolar paradigm”, we should note, was not for nothing subtitled Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) because a charred, radioactive wasteland was the booty or logical peace dividend for any hypothetical “winner”. Also, the MAD paradigm more subtly underlined the role of economic and military infrastructures, which as they become more sophisticated, become more vulnerable. Often scenarized by US and Soviet military strategists during the Cold War, the utilization of a small number of missile-launched airburst nuclear weapons would instantly paralyse the enemy’s command and control infrastructure, electric power and telephone systems, water supplies, fuel supplies, road transport and so on. There could be no winner, only two losers.

Discussion of military infrastructure, and its fragility, however shifts the spotlight away from a key element of asymmetric war – the role of ideology and personal commitment. Command-and-control operated by, for example Mao Zedong in his ‘Long March’ war campaign, was primarily ideological at its beginnings. Conversely, in nearly all conventional set-piece wars – which are now likely a thing of the past, the belligerents deployed forces that were essentially of similar type. The war’s outcome could normally be predicted by the physical size, quantity and control of the forces in play. Where the forces are essentially equal, with access to the same technology, the outcome is usually stalemate. The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88 was a classic example.

This already makes it possible to define probably the most decisive motivating role for asymmetric fighting forces – technological superiority is canceled by infrastructure fragility. Alternately stated technological inferiority is often canceled by the enemy’s vulnerable military, ideological and economic infrastructures. The Afghan war of 1979-88 was a classic example.

Including vulnerable economic infrastructures, asymmetric wars such as this Afghan War (and the US-Afghan war of 2001-2014) will heavily feature urban insurgency and the destruction of

economic infrastructures, which either directly support the more-powerful enemy's military capability or provide indirect aid to the enemy's ideological action, attempting to maintain a semblance of "normal life". Asymmetric wars, we can again note, are often very long and measured in decades, not years, and in part due to this can include a major element of attrition, both economic and ideological.

Terrain and Proxies



Certainly the case in asymmetric wars of Antiquity, small inferior forces fighting the opposite can "trump the enemy" using terrain – which today includes and features urban areas. As I have noted in recent articles concerning Syrian war geopolitics, one basic reason why "Syria" is a non-nation and a geopolitical metastase of the Sykes-Picot era of Great Power diplomacy – is due to extreme geological folding of the mountainous coastal strip with peaks higher than 2000 meters, where more than 90% of the population lives. This rough, hilly terrain has always favored small autonomous or semi-autonomous population groupings, all of them with a long tradition of conflict including "asymmetric" combat. Ideological differences are often extreme, for example the age-old conflict between traditional Alawites and the Assassin heretic sect of the Alawites.

During the long Crusader war series, for example, the Assassins turned their fighting skills against the invading European crusaders. After this 200-year war series, they returned to fighting any centralising power based in Damascus. The same applies to the Druzes, and to other "mountain fighters". On numerous occasions, often for decades, fighting groups in what is called "Syria" served as proxies in and for highly complex military campaigns. One examples was the period through about 1204-1260 when a loose alliance of southern powers or "statelets" opposed the larger, better armed Latin Empire of the Byzantines.

No power – either great or small, can change geology and geomorphology. To be sure, Stalin-era Soviet campaigns against Chechens, Daghestanis and other small, ideologically tight-knit "mountain fighters", and the campaign waged in this geopolitical rimland or shatter-belt since the 1990s by Russia, have attempted their eradication. In Afghanistan, as the USSR and later the US found out, so-called mountain fighters can easily urbanize and rapidly shift to urban theater conflict, broadening their warfare tactics with ease.

The major and increasing role of proxy fighting itself favors a shift to asymmetric war. Since the end of World War II, some military historians claim the majority of wars on a numerical basis

fought since 1945 have either included, or been dominated by proxy fighters. This in turn means more belligerents, with usually different motivations, staying power, weapons and tactics, will be operating in any warfare. This also means that “surprise outcomes” become more commonplace, for example when proxies turn against their original partners or actively side with their former enemy or enemies.

Biological Warfare – Then and Now

Widely used in the Crusader war series, and imported back to Europe with returning Crusaders by the start of the 14th century, early biological warfare featured the catapulting of diseased putrefying corpses, often of horses or other animals, sometimes of humans into castle moats. By the time of the so-called Hundred Years War starting about 1340, biological war was common place in siege warfare.



With the Black Death (bubonic plague) epidemic which spread from the western Balkans and killed an estimated 25%-33% of the total population of Europe in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, bodies of bubonic plague victims were utilised as weapons as commonly as munitions, arrows and other weapons in the majority of European wars. Death rates obtained using these “asymmetric weapons”, according to military historians could often exceed 950 killed for every 1000 enemy attacked.

Today we hear about the Syrian regime of Bashr al-Assad, and-or opposing rebel forces, utilizing chemical weapons, but chemical weapons akin to napalm were utilized on a common basis in warfare opposing the Byzantine Empire and sometimes-insurgent, often small-scale Muslim forces, by 670 AD. These early chemical weapons increasingly used additives including chalk powder, arsenic sulfide, copper oxides and other toxic suffocants to increase lethality.

By the early 18th century, the UK Royal Society was theater to recurring debates on how to protect land armies against biological warfare, in particular protection against smallpox bacteria due to smallpox being already known as a biological weapon. By about 1715, the technique of variolation, or immunization against smallpox was developed, firstly with a view to protecting British fighting forces despite early immunization by variolation causing an estimated 2%-3% mortality of treated soldiers. As we know, the conquest of the US Wild West in the 18th-19th

centuries made frequent use of smallpox bacteria to kill Indian fighters and peoples who were not immunized. Historians contend that General George Washington who had warned his troops that English forces might use smallpox as a weapon in the Battle of Quebec (1775) which was lost by the Americans, was himself killed by smallpox poisoning in 1776.

It is therefore either by hypocrisy, ignorance or blindness that mainstream media and many politicians pretend that CBW (chemical and biological weapons) are both strange and repulsive. For numerically inferior forces, they can provide a decisive advantage similar to the historical role of crossbows, in the Middle Ages.

Their utilization in asymmetric war has been more the rule, than exception. This logic certainly extends to the broad group of asymmetric arms called 'NBC' (nuclear, biological, chemical) weapons – the arsenals held by the small nations North Korea and Israel reflect their political rulers' fear of numerically superior enemy forces. As we know, both mass-produced pesticides and relatively abundant nuclear wastes, among others, are major potential asymmetric weapons.

In truth, the nations who have mostly developed and proliferated these type of CBW 'weapons of mass destruction' in recent years – are the western allied powers of US, Britain, France – and although we may not see these weapons necessarily deployed on the battlefield, the advanced research labs and military delivery systems are still open for business. Don't be surprised if their products turn up in the hands of other foreign forces, as history can certainly attest.

The Coming Global Asymmetric War

Andrew J. Mack made the point that big nations can easily lose small wars. He did not add that due to weapons technology and MAD, they can only lose big wars. This standoff – or new weakness – of the great powers whether they describe themselves as “great” or not, has certainly been observed and noted by the large number of their asymmetric war-oriented opponents and rivals.

When added to the impacts of economic and industrial technology change, described in other recent articles by myself, the concept of either one or a select few hegemonic powers dominating world political-strategic relations is consigned to trashcan of History. Probably since as early as 1980, certainly in the coming decades from today, this observation will be put to the test.

Russia's Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry in a diplomatic dogfight over Syria.

The Syrian civil war – which is a showcase of asymmetric war and proxy warfare – could be taken as an example. Neither Russia nor the US can win this war. Iran's supposed interest in this war might also be questioned. European influence in any outcome to this war is small and weak. Chinese, Indian and other Asian interest in this war is very low. Only extremely massive and sustained, therefore very expensive military occupation on a long-term basis could create or restore any *simulacre* or surrogate for “the nation state of Syria”. No major external power has any interest in this outcome. The staying power of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE and other Sunni-

minority small states paying for Syrian theatre proxy fighters, called “djihadis”, despite the petrodollars and the Wahabism, can easily be questioned.

What was called “Syria” therefore become a shatter-belt zone in modern geopolitical parlance, very comparable with the pre-1914 Balkan states, and pre-1917 Middle Eastern and North African states. Formerly called “rimland states”, shatter-belt zones can also be called the Funeral Pyres of Empire due to these intrinsically volatile and ungovernable zones often being gateways to larger zones of major economic significance, drawing repeated attempts at dominance by the great powers.

Multiple examples exist outside the zone including southern Russia, the Balkans (of 2014), western Asia, and the MENA. Under certain hypotheses, zones like the Europe of the EU28, engaged in an undeclared power struggle with Russia to win power over the Ukraine, may be an example.

More important for this article, most definitely intensified by asymmetric war ideology, tactics and weapons, world shatter-belt zones of “permanent instability” are growing – and they are necessarily growing. Sometimes called “multipolarity” and presented as the positive spin-off from economic globalisation, and above all presented as consensual by the great powers (and would-be great powers), the loss of centre and the growth of periphery is a stark fact of the coming world.

This stark fact is of course denied by the so-called great powers. However, when there is no longer a ruling centre and the central power or Hegemon, there is only periphery and no Hegemon in a series of complex rimlands and shatter belts.