
Asymmetry in national security threats

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Abstract

Asymmetric relations are emerging as an increasingly important element of the analysis of threats to national security. Most often, the term “asymmetry” is used to describe the relationship between incomparable in power and status opponents. The asymmetry is generally associated with the paradoxical nature of the relationship in which the weaker opponent is in a position to inflict serious losses or even impose its will on a – strong and even more powerful it is not always to assert its interests and to subordinate more the weak opponent. Probably not exhaustive, due to the vastness of the topic and numerous sources, in this paper I will try to consider and analyze at least some of the manifestations of “asymmetry in modern conflicts” and links with terrorism, national security and the most recent conflicts in recent years.

Key words: asymmetric threats, asymmetric war, asymmetric conflict.

Introduction

The first asymmetric is often considered to be the Vietnam War (or the Second Indochina War), which was fought from 1955 to 1975 between the United States and South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam) on the one hand, and North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and the People’s Republic of Vietnam. Vietnam Liberation Front (Viet Cong) on the other.

Asymmetrically manifested aspects can be found in almost all contemporary conflicts. Starting with the military operation in Iraq in 2003 and the coalition’s inability to end the war according to its original plans (that is, to establish full control of the country after the defeat of its army), as well as the transformation of hostilities into guerrilla warfare, which operation is defined as a classic example of “asymmetric conflict”.

In the Iraq conflict, there is a clear mismatch between the power capabilities of the opponents, their status and military tactics.

As early as the 1960s, guerrilla wars waged under occupation or colonial rule, as well as national liberation movements, were classified as asymmetric conflicts (Deutsche Welle).

In the modern globalized world, “asymmetric conflicts” intersect with terrorism in all its manifestations and aspects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the twentieth century, terrorism was one of the most important problems of the statehood and the special services of many countries around the world.

Many countries, including Bulgaria, are aware of the need to change their military doctrines and laws in the light of the challenge called global terrorism and the reality of the conflicts in the modern world.

As a basis for “asymmetric conflicts”, we must consider the very concept of conflict.

Results and Discussion

Asymmetric warfare is a modern military term for war in which military capabilities or accepted methods of combat don’t match in the two warring groups. In this way, the weaker side is forced to use its advantages more intensively or to injure the opponent in its weaker countries in order to have a chance to win the conflict.

The current development would not be understandable if we don't mention two of the modern asymmetric conflicts, namely: Ukraine and Syria.

The urgency of these unresolved and continuing conflicts makes them extremely important for global security.

In Ukraine, it began with a protest against former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Meanwhile, the crisis in Ukraine has become a conflict of international political importance.

On the other hand, we are all witnessing the horrors of the war in Syria and the refugee crisis. The 11.5 million Syrian refugees who have fled are directly affected by the conflict, which can rightly be called the most devastating civil war to date. About 400,000 casualties in five years, according to the UN, and more and more catastrophic damage in the future, but behind all this are historical events that are largely unknown to most people.

The Syrian civil war is an extremely complex issue that does not begin with the clashes between the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the opposition in 2011.

The roots of the problem can be traced over the last few decades to the entire Middle East policy.

In most such conflicts, the weak opponent is unable to defeat the strong. As a rule, however, he is the first to intrude on the strong way of developing the conflict. In this sense, the weak intrudes on the strong will and manages to achieve political victory, for which power is actually used, according to the classical definition of war.

Since the 1960s, the concept of asymmetry has been used by international relations experts, political scientists and military experts to analyze conflicts between developed and developing countries.

The study of the paradox of asymmetric conflicts and attempts to formulate their theoretical justification are devoted to the works of a number of analysts such as Andrew Mack, Ivan Erigin-Taft, Michael Fischerkel, Zeev Maoz, Jill Merram and others.

They reiterate the thesis that the success of the military campaign in such a conflict does not depend so much on the power potential of the opponents, but on the interaction between military-strategic and tactical factors with non-military factors for victory, i.e. the political, psychological and ideological parameters of the situation.

As many researchers point out, victory requires war support from the entire society of the warring state, i.e. their legitimacy. And this factor is crucial for both strengths and weaknesses.

In his book, *Why Do Great Nations Lose Small Wars?* (Doykov, N., 2008, p. 126), Andrew Mack notes that behind the inequality between the power capabilities of the parties to the conflict may be more important asymmetries – such as asymmetry in relations to a particular war or asymmetry in the ability of countries to mobilize society in support.

The second type of asymmetry is manifested in the dichotomy of “limited” and “total” war, or in the use of asymmetric tactics – the actions of guerrilla groups against the regular army. Often this type of asymmetry explains the reasons for the victory of the weak and the defeat of the strong.

Mack's main thesis is that the war is usually lost by those who have lost the political will to continue it, and the most important condition for such a will is public support for the purposes of war.

According to him, democracies often lose the “small wars” on the “internal front” because they are unable to mobilize society to continue the war and provide a convincing justification for its goals, human casualties and material losses, and so the war loses its legitimacy in the eyes of the nation.

Only those countries that are really waging war in the name of a meaningful and universal idea are able to maintain the mobilization of the available material and human resources necessary for a long time to achieve victory against the superior enemy. At the same time, the strong attachment of society to the goals of war can bring it closer to the idea of “absolute war”, especially since its logic, as a rule, prevails over the logic of “limited” or “small” war.

It is the asymmetry of will and interest that explains why in the 1960s the formally stronger country (France) refused to continue the struggle with its weaker opponent (Algeria).

In addition to the already mentioned limited nature of hostilities, the phenomenon of the “little war” also testifies to the weaker nation’s weak commitment to the goals of the war. At some point, the benefits of achieving victory by military means began to be perceived by society as insufficient to justify the human, material and moral losses from the continuation of the war.

In the 1960s, Raymond Aron found it natural that:

“At a certain point, the colonizer deserves to pay for the restoration of order and to spend significant funds on the peoples who are fighting against him” (Doykov, N., 2008, p. 84).

An example of this is how similar sentiments are forming in American public opinion these days.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for democracies to justify the goals of the wars (especially the “small ones”) they are waging, and to provide the necessary public support to start and continue them.

This hypothesis brings us back to Immanuel Kant’s least contested thesis of lasting peace among nations, according to which enlightened societies do not support the aggressive foreign policy of their governments.

Indicative in this regard is the title of Jill Merram’s book “How Democracies Lose Small Wars”, which analyzes asymmetric conflicts. The author deliberately questions the established view of the peaceful nature of democracies in the light of the critique of the theory of “democratic peace”, and thus further argues the thesis launched by other analysts about the causes of the defeat of developed countries in conflicts in the Third world.

Merham notes that political scientists often view society as a passive object involved in military action by the political and military elites, without taking into account the complex nature of relations between society, the state and war.

Entering into a controversy with the supporters of “political realism”, the author proves that the modern “paradox of power” (power paradox) is explained by the internal struggle in democracies between the “state” and the educated “middle class”.

It is the latter that forms the basis of “society” and determines its behavior towards the three aspects of waging a war: instrumental, political and normative.

Merum formulates these relationships through the following three dilemmas:

- how to reconcile the values of humanism to which part of the educated middle class adheres with the atrocities that accompany anti-insurgency wars;
- how to find a socially acceptable relationship between the atrocities of war and the willingness to make sacrifices in its name;
- how to provide the necessary support for the war without eroding the foundations of the democratic order.

The last dilemma – about the “relationship” between wars and democracy – directly illustrates the above-mentioned tendency to violate or limit democratic foundations and values in war-torn societies.

For more than 60 years since the end of World War II, many national liberation and anti-colonial movements have used the strategy of guerrilla warfare to deplete, if not the power, the will of the enemy, forcing him to accept concessions.

Mao Zedong’s well-known theses on the strategy and tactics of guerrilla warfare are in astonishing consonance with the reasons for the defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War (1964-1975) by Henry Kissinger. Both see the reasons for the Vietnamese victory in the protracted nature of the war, which is exhausting the United States, despite their military superiority.

North Vietnam’s success is due to the guerrilla tactics of “small victories” that allowed communist forces to avoid direct clashes with American forces.

The hard-to-find and invulnerable forces of the Vietnamese guerrillas were a major advantage in the face of the easy-to-detect concentration of US troops. In addition, the local population supported the communist resistance, perceiving the struggle against American forces as “just and liberating”.

Thus, for the weaker country in the Vietnam War, it is enough “not to lose”.

On the other hand, in order to win, the strong side necessarily needs an undisputed military victory.

Henry Alfred Kissinger even derived the “formula for the victory of the guerrillas”: “...the guerrillas win until they lose, and the regular army is defeated until it manages to hold a decisive victory” (Kissinger, Henry, 2011, p. 89).

He also pointed to another important factor in the victory – the ability of each country to ensure the security of the civilian population in the war zone. He wins the force (whether the regular army or the guerrillas) that can achieve this to the maximum.

Such a task, however, often proves impossible for the regular army fighting on foreign soil. In this sense, local guerrillas “sooner or later are doomed to victory”.

Terrorism at the beginning of the 21st century is a variant of asymmetric warfare, as it embodies the logic of the struggle of the “weak” against the “strong”. German scientist Herfried Münkler claims that terrorism (as a means of fighting the “weak”) has “replaced guerrilla warfare, which for a long period of the twentieth century performed this function”.

Conclusions

Terrorism differs from guerrilla warfare by its aggressive nature, less dependence on the local population and the ability to actively use the infrastructure of developed countries for its own purposes.

Modern terrorism is a kind of war, in the classical and interpretation, as a forced imposition of one’s own will on the enemy, with this important feature that the terrorist struggle is “oriented to the asymmetry through which players who are infinitely weaker in technological and organizational terms, from their much more powerful opponent, they are able to fight him successfully”.

The difference between guerrilla warfare and terrorist strategies is the conscious use of the paradoxical advantages of strategic asymmetry. Traditional guerrilla movements seek to achieve symmetry in their relations with the enemy and then to achieve victory in the armed struggle against him.

In turn, terrorist groups seek to erode the moral and psychological potential of the enemy without coming into direct contact with his military machine. At the same time, they choose for their strikes the most vulnerable targets in one country or another, thus avoiding all the military barriers and defense mechanisms for the creation of which modern societies invest so much money, trying to ensure their security.

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