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**IS ASYMMETRICAL WARFARE A USEFUL CONCEPT?
ASSESSING THE ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT**

TÍTULO EN CASTELLANO

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Abstract

This article presents a general overview of the asymmetrical warfare's concept. It looks into several theoretical approaches and, at the same time, uses three historical examples to clarify some authors positions. Mentions to the Palestinian first *Intifada*, *Al-Qaeda*, and the Russian military operation over Ukraine will be presented.

Keyword

Palestina – Conflict – Asymmetrical Warfare

Resumen

En el artículo que a continuación se presenta, pasaremos revista a una visión general del concepto de guerra asimétrica. Lo observaremos teóricamente en varios de sus enfoques, utilizando a la vez, tres ejemplos históricos para aclarar algunas posiciones de los respectivos autores. Veremos la primera Intifada Palestina, Al-Qaeda y la operación militar rusa sobre Ucrania.

Palabras Claves

Palestina – Conflicto – Guerra asimétrica

The character of war is a reflection of human societies and historical contexts. War changes as human societies do; war adapts itself to circumstances, war endures. As Chris Hables Gray argues, “*war is a living text, after all, and we are all of us bound into it (...)*.”¹ Therefore, every war has an explanation; causes and effects are indeed a very important part of this complex understanding but the problem, however, is how to define properly its diffused character in different historical backgrounds.

The term Asymmetrical Warfare is nowadays, a very common way to explain an important amount of international security threats and war scenarios around the world. But, is this concept really useful? Can this notion help us to understand the actual condition of warfare? This is not a simple question to answer mainly because we believe that the utility of this denomination depends on a remarkable dichotomy.

The academic debate has developed a very interesting current approach to this issue, especially considering that “*although the term <asymmetric warfare> is modern, the concept is old as warfare itself.*”² This means that, despite the fact that every single war is asymmetric, the contemporary asymmetrical warfare significance shows that the great powers and their military forces have to be aware of the dangers of non-conventional enemies. The fact that a political and military power could be more powerful than others, is not a problem anymore. On the contrary, the problem today is that the actual conditions of any war scenario can be defined by less powerful actors which are able to impose their conditions into the conflict. Consequently, the dichotomy is defined, on one side, by the natural distance which exists between military opponents and on the other side, by the non-conventional means used by new actors. For a better understanding, definitions have to be made.

In words of Adam B. Lowther,

*“over the past 3000 years asymmetric warfare was given many names. For Sun-Tzu, asymmetry was the pinnacle of the art of war. Tacitus called asymmetric warfare the barbarian’s way of rebellion. T.E. Lawrence called it desert warfare. Mao Zedong used the term mobile guerilla warfare (...).”*³

As we can see, asymmetrical warfare is not a new phenomenon; the novelty is that some of its manifestations are, in our background, more common than in other historical contexts.

Terrorism and insurgency, for example, can be defined as types of asymmetrical warfare but they don’t define the only possible term interpretation. Not every asymmetrical warfare uses terrorist acts or insurgency methods as a military tactic. We need to be aware of this situation because it may cause serious misunderstandings.

The relevance of non-state actors as new participants of the world political order is also essential in conditions today. Accordingly, we agree with the difference established by

¹ Chris Hables Gray, *Postmodern War. The new politics of conflicts* (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.

² Ian Kemp, *Asymmetrical Warfare*, Armada International, ProQuest Business Collection, April/May (2007) 1.

³ Adam B. Lowther, *Americans and asymmetric conflict. Lebanon, Somalia and Afghanistan*, (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 53.

Ekaterina Stepanova between “asymmetrical warfare” and “asymmetrical confrontation”⁴. According to her point of view, the first term rests in aspects which are related to military tactics; it “exploits the opponent’s weakness and vulnerabilities and emphasizes differences in forces, technologies, weapons and rules of engagement.”⁵ On the contrary, the asymmetrical confrontation “should be further extended to go beyond the gaps in military power.”⁶ When considering the real capacity of the enemy, it would be a very big mistake to consider only its military capacity. For Stepanova, asymmetry shows another interesting characteristic; it could be related with qualitative and quantitative dimensions:

“in other words, the conflict is fully asymmetrical when the notion of power is extended to include a status imbalance; that is when the conflict is between actors of different status. The most basic form of such conflict is a confrontation between a non-state actor and a state, or states.”⁷

Vladi Sofroniev presents another interesting definition for this complex term. He argues that it is very difficult to understand asymmetrical warfare if we don’t consider the new threats imposed to the contemporary international system. In his words, these dangers “are expressed at different degrees of intensity (thus) Asymmetric warfare is best understood as a strategy, a tactic or a method of warfare and conflict.”⁸ To prove this, he mentions the idea of <fourth generation warfare>, but especially “new fourth-generation warriors, non-national and trans-national groups based on ideology, religion, tribe, culture, zealotry and illegal and economic activities.”⁹ This new consideration is, in our understanding, essential to determine the value of cultural aspects as another essential aspect of this discussion.

It is impossible to speak about asymmetric warfare if we don’t consider the importance of a heterogeneous set of values in every society, especially in those which are willing to go to war against more powerful adversaries. In Paul R. Camacho’s conception,

“asymmetrical warfare refers to the difference, and the use of this difference to gain an advantage over the opposition. The notion of asymmetry becomes most apparent in the contrast of conflicts between very dissimilar cultures with different levels of economic, social, and political structures.”¹⁰

As we argued before, the contemporary asymmetrical warfare has been defined by historical contexts and conditions. Its development could be explained as a reaction of non-conventional political actors against powerful conventional armies and cohesive societies. This has been especially evident after the Cold War, when the political and military dispersion of small international powers began to define the development of new warfare scenarios. Therefore, “recognizing the unrivaled strength of the American military, it was

⁴ Ekaterina Stepanova, *Terrorism in asymmetrical conflict. Ideological and structural aspects* (New York: Oxford University, 2008), 17.

⁵ Ekaterina Stepanova, *Terrorism in asymmetrical conflict...*

⁶ Ekaterina Stepanova, *Terrorism in asymmetrical conflict...*

⁷ Ekaterina Stepanova, *Terrorism in asymmetrical conflict...* 19.

⁸ Vladi Sofroniev, *Asymmetrical Warfare. Old method, new concern*, *Strategic Impact*, Issue 2 (2005) 73.

⁹ Vladi Sofroniev, *Asymmetrical Warfare. Old method...* 74.

¹⁰ Paul R. Camacho, *American Warfare in the twenty-first century*, *New England Journal of Public Policy*, Vol: 10, Issue 1 (2003) 208.

*believed that adversaries of the U.S. would seek to avoid direct confrontation with the most powerful military in the world and, instead, strike at American weakness.*¹¹

In this context, Thomas X. Hammes argues that the historical case of the first Palestinian Intifada in 1987 is a very good example of the progressive adaptability of asymmetrical actors. In his words, *“The people (Palestinians) felt a common identity, they had an enemy to focus against, they had mass organizations, and they had effective local leadership.”*¹² Thus, the most important element here is that this was a popular revolt and not a particular case of guerrilla warfare against Israel. An asymmetrical confrontation became the only real possibility of this whole society to engage a conventional and powerful army in the occupied territories, especially in the West Bank. The leaders of the mass revolt *“exhorted the Palestinians to use rocks instead of rifles and to ensure that their symbols (the flags) were present everywhere.”*¹³ In this new scenario, the Israeli military forces had to reformulate their tactics in order to, first of all, understand this new threat and secondly, deal with the new conditions imposed by a very important amount of Palestinians in the dispute territories. The fact is that *“suddenly, the Israeli security forces were not invincible. They were no longer universally feared. As with all occupying armies, the psychological aspects of the occupation were an important as the physical aspects.”*¹⁴ Israel gradually began to learn the importance of considering asymmetrical warfare as a new threat to its conventional military power.

The growth and development of terrorism is another face of our contemporary asymmetrical warfare reality. For Ekaterina Stepanova,

*“(…) of all asymmetrical ways to strike back that are available to a weaker party, terrorism is perhaps the most effective way to balance this asymmetry by making enemy civilians suffer as much as those in whose name the terrorists claim to act.”*¹⁵

Nevertheless we need to remember that this kind of asymmetrical tactic depends highly on ideological factors and is not the only way to understand asymmetrical warfare. Terrorist acts are indeed part of a global warfare which intends to accomplish political goals by using fear as a psychological tool. For example, Al-Qaeda –one of the most important terrorist organizations since 2001- did recognize how to manage the asymmetrical conditions of its global fighting. Asymmetry became, in this case, an advantage for this organization, especially because *“(…) it has long relied upon small and local groups as <subcontractors> for its major terrorist attacks. The network resiliency stems from its ability to rely clandestine cells, as well as <affiliates>.”*¹⁶ This resiliency has meant a very important element for this kind of non-governmental actors since the beginning of the Islamist terrorism expansion.

¹¹ Adam B. Lowther, Americans and asymmetric conflict. Lebanon, Somalia and Afghanistan... 2.

¹² Thomas X. Hammes, The Sling and the Stone: on war in the twenty-first Century (Saint Paul: Zenith Press, 2006), 96.

¹³ Thomas X. Hammes, The Sling and the Stone... 100.

¹⁴ Thomas X. Hammes, The Sling and the Stone... 106.

¹⁵ Ekaterina Stepanova, Terrorism in asymmetrical conflict... 18.

¹⁶ Jonathan Schanzer, Al-Qaeda's Armies. Middle East affiliate groups and the next generation of Terror (New York: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005), 16.

Another proof of the importance and utility of the asymmetrical warfare concept could be related to the present conditions of the tense political relationships between Russia and the West, especially with the United States. It is not a secret, for example, that an important amount of analysts and scholars are trying to answer the question of the main reasons which would explain the success of Vladimir Putin's international strategy over Ukraine. The fact is that this crisis was a very important sign of a cold asymmetrical warfare between Russia and the Western countries. The paradox here is that this type of asymmetry is not related to non-governmental actors, terrorist groups or a particular case of insurgency. The issue here was the existence of several asymmetrical differences between two conventional powers. One, of course, with a more powerful military strength than the other. As Kim R. Holmes argues, "*Vladimir Putin's destabilization of Ukraine continues apace while the U.S. and the Europeans are powerless to stop him, and all of this is happening despite the fact that by any reasonable measure Russia is weaker than the West.*"¹⁷ In this background, Putin's political perspective defined a rational decision to use some Russian's cultural values as an advantage against the West. The willingness to take big risks, for example, was one of the most important elements in the Kremlin's decision making process. The fact is,

*"(...) He seems to understand full well that the Americans and Europeans will always hold themselves back from tough measures (...) they seem to care as much as they claim about their celebrated values. He is effectively calling the West's bluff."*¹⁸

As we see, in this type of asymmetry the essential factor was not anymore the effectiveness of a conventional military power, but the way to impose the terms of the warfare scenario. In other words, "*who controls the international narrative gets to shape its values and rules.*"¹⁹

To conclude, the asymmetrical warfare concept is an essential feature of the current worldwide political and military conditions. Nevertheless, we need to remember that every single war is essentially asymmetrical; this is, in fact, the reason which would explain the gap between victors and losers. The novelty –especially in our historical context- is that the conventional military power, and even the political hegemony, could be easily affected by new threats related to alternative conceptions of ways to win a war. Today, any military conventional power needs to understand that their opponents are willing to take big risks considering especially, their cultural differences. For smaller and disperse powers, this could be a very useful way to engage powerful conventional armies. The growth of Al-Qaeda's military influence is a very good example of this, particularly considering that "*with the 9/11 attacks, Bin Laden showed the danger in not understanding the culture of the nation you are fighting.*"²⁰

Asymmetrical warfare is indeed a very useful concept if we are willing to accept that our contemporary political and military scenario is essentially dispersed and new international actors are developing complex and unexpected capabilities.

¹⁷ Kim R. Holmes, Putin's Asymmetrical War, Foreign Affairs, May 2014 in: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/05/putins-asymmetrical-war-on-the-west>, 1.

¹⁸ Kim R. Holmes, Putin's Asymmetrical War... 2.

¹⁹ Kim R. Holmes, Putin's Asymmetrical War... 3.

²⁰ Thomas X. Hammes, The Sling and the Stone... 139.

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