Countering Asymmetrical Warfare in the 21st Century: A Grand Strategic Vision

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Introduction

There is growing evidence that asymmetrical warfare has become a strategy of choice among dissident, extremist political groups and will be the most likely national and international security threat in the 21st century. Operating in small, covert groups, and having no recognized sovereign territory or population to defend, asymmetrical combatants can engage in violent, lethal activities with far less risk of being totally overwhelmed by reprisals that a nation-state might face. In addition, those killed in action can be portrayed as martyrs and used to recruit more converts to the cause.

A great many lessons have been learned over the years on how to counter asymmetrical threats, and the breadth, complexity and international scope of the threat are now generally recognized. Moreover, much has been written on countering the threat, particularly since the September 11 terrorist attacks, and many corrective measures have been suggested and adopted. But as yet, there has as yet not been a grand strategic vision encompassing all the many, varied facets of the threat.

It has not been a lack of understanding or of lessons learned about the many varied elements of asymmetrical warfare that has lead to the lack of progress in effectively countering threats in recent years. Rather it has been has been the lack of a new, comprehensive strategic vision against what is essentially a new and different type of armed conflict. The intention of this article is to help fill that gap.

The focus is on containing future threats, not on critiquing past failures. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan, the abortive Israeli attack on Hezbollah in 2006 and the Bush Administration's ongoing Global War On Terror (GWOT) are only instructive only in pointing out that reliance on conventional military strategies is inadequate to meet what has essentially evolved into a totally new national and, indeed, global security threat.

The Nature of Asymmetrical Warfare

Motivation

"War," wrote Carl Von Clausewitz, "is the continuation of politics by other means." Asymmetrical warfare refers to armed conflicts to achieve political objectives, and as the name implies, involves a disproportionate distribution of power. Unlike most conventional warfare, it is usually (though

not always) initiated by the weaker side. Perhaps the first question that needs to be addressed, therefore, is why rational persons who are overwhelmingly outclassed militarily would resort to armed conflict.

One popular explanation commonly heard is that asymmetrical combatants are either mentally deranged, morally depraved, or a combination of both. That notion has been rejected by social science research on asymmetrical behavior. Simply stated, the psychology behind unsanctioned lethal violence "is normal psychology, abnormal only in the intensity of the group dynamics that link causes with comrades."[1] As for moral depravity, a case can be made that asymmetrical combatants tend to be among the most fanatically moralistic people on earth. Asymmetrical warfare is generally a strategy of last resort, and those who engage in it are convinced that their political ends are so morally imperative that they justify whatever means are necessary to achieve them

Another explanation, often applied to Islamic Jihadism, is that the extremist ideology espoused by asymmetrical organizations is itself a primary motivating factor in convincing people to commit evil, immoral lethal acts by imbuing them with hatred toward the perceived enemy. The fallacy here is that hostility (hatred) is rarely if ever created by indoctrination of an extremist ideology unless there is a predisposition to want to believe it. According to social psychology, fear and grievance, not dogma, are the two root causes of anger which for some can lead over time to hostility. In seeking an outlet for that hostility, some people ultimately resort to committing lethal violent acts. The role of ideology, therefore, is more often to justify rather than to motivate people to commit otherwise criminal and anti-social behavior.

In addition, virtually all major political ideologies, sectarian as well as secular, present a wide array of peaceful as well as violent alternatives.[2] Thus, one cannot adequately understand why people engage in lethal asymmetrical acts by analyzing asymmetrical ideologies since the factors that motivate people to embrace this or that ideology lie outside as well as inside the parameters of ideological precepts.[3] In sum, one does not normally "learn" hostility from exposure to extremist dogmas. The initial stage is developing a predisposition to commit violence in response to the fears and grievances, regardless of their source.

A major source of fear and grievance is future shock, particularly in traditional societies. The rapid pace of modernization in recent years, accelerated by unprecedented advances in communications and information technology and by economic and social globalization is universal. It has been particularly disorienting and stressful to members of traditional societies. The spread of secular western cultural values that inevitably accompany rapid modernization is particularly threatening to people whose cultural norms are based on religious values that have remained unchanged for centuries.

Those who harbor a high degree of fear, grievance and hostility as a result of future shock constitute a major pool of potential recruits and supporters for asymmetrical organizations. And once they are convinced that outside powers are the underlying source of all their grievances, the indiscriminate use of counter force by those powers is more likely to strengthen rather than undermine participation and support, even among those not personally prone to violence themselves. Identifying and reaching out to members of this group, therefore, is a major priority for asymmetrical organizations seeking to gain recruits as and supporters without whom they cannot long survive.

Group psychology can also play an important role in motivating people to join asymmetrical organizations. Many combatants have already bonded before joining an asymmetrical organization. In addition, as Clark McCauley notes, "Group identification makes sense of sacrifice by people who are not frustrated or insulted."[4] Moreover, asymmetrical organizations often tend to develop fanatical countercultures with their own codes of behavior that tend to be on the fringe of what is normally acceptable, and into which all new recruits are indoctrinated.

Asymmetrical Strategic Objectives

Although all armed political conflicts have much in common, their strategic objectives can differ widely. The primary strategic objective of asymmetrical warfare is psychological, not military. It is to intimidate the adversary psychologically by directly or indirectly inflicting fear and terror in order to achieve its political agenda. In more descriptive terms, it is, "the combined use and threat of violence that is directed at one set a targets—the victims—to compel compliance or allegiance from another set of targets (targets of demands) or to impress a wider audience that is not directly involved in a specific conflict (the mass media, the general public, world opinion, other governments, etc.)"[5]

Asymmetrical combatants generally use covert terrorist and unconventional guerrilla warfare tactics and seek to avoid direct military encounters with the adversaries' vastly superior armed forces. This is in sharp contrast to conventional military warfare strategies that involve direct military-on-military confrontations with the strategic objective being to erode the enemy forces' will to fight, and thereby to produce decisive military victories that can force the defeated side to accept the victors' terms.

The second but vital strategic objective in asymmetrical warfare is to win the hearts and minds of potential sympathizers and supporters, thereby gaining financial and logistic support, safe haven, and the ability to recruit new combatants. No asymmetrical organization or movement can long survive much less achieve its political objectives without a significant outside support system.

Organizational and Operational Scope

Asymmetrical warfare organizations come in all sizes, from small independent local groups to large multi-national operational organizations and support networks, terrorist and insurgency support groups. All asymmetrical organizations share the same basic psychological strategic objectives and the same predilection for the use of covert, unconventional military tactics. Where they might differ is in the scope of operations.

There are two general types of organizational structures: individual terrorist attacks and broader insurgencies. Although the latter are generally carried out by larger dissident national or sub-national organizations, asymmetrical organizations can be involved in both terrorist and insurgent operations. For example, al-Qaeda is a large multi-national terrorist organization that has undertaken individual terrorist attacks in the United States, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, but has also been active in insurgency operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan where the principal political objective is regime change.

If successful to the degree that asymmetrical combatants can challenge a regime militarily, the nature of the conflict changes from asymmetrical warfare to conventional military warfare. It might still involve unconventional military tactics, but the combatants will have adopted conventional strategic military objective of destroying the enemy forces' will to fight.

In the past, asymmetrical organizations were primarily concerned with sub-national, national and regional political issues. That began to change in the 1980s. Due largely to great advances in and easy access to communications, transportation and weapons technology, asymmetrical warfare has become multinational in scope, with networks and affiliate organizations in many countries. And as a result of globalization and the breakdown of national border security, it has also become transnational in operational reach, with the capability to strike across national boundaries.

Despite the globalization of asymmetrical warfare, however, even the largest organizations are not monolithic in scope with unified chain of command and span of control structures comparable

to effective national military and/or security services. Primary personal loyalty of individual terrorist members in large organizations and networks still generally remains within local small units or groups of individuals who joined and bonded together and who share many local fears and grievances not shared by affiliate groups elsewhere.

Nevertheless, globalization of the threat has increasingly made asymmetrical warfare the strategy of choice in the 21st century for many sub-national and multinational dissident groups that are hopelessly outmatched militarily by their chosen adversaries. Having no national territory or population to defend, they can engage in violent activities with far less risk of being totally overwhelmed by reprisals that a nation-state might face. In addition, those killed in action can be portrayed as martyrs and used to recruit more converts to the cause.

Tactics: A Work in Progress

Asymmetrical tactics are many faceted and constantly changing. The choice of attack as well as the target depends on the element of surprise and the greatest psychological impact for the least amount downside risk of failure. Both are therefore subject to change.

The element of surprise is crucial, creating a constant "cat and mouse" relationship between attackers and defenders. Attackers constantly seek the most unanticipated attacks on targets with the greatest amount of vulnerability. Defenders must not only reduce vulnerability of likely targets but must also anticipate new tactics and new target choices. For example, although there has yet to have been a catastrophic WMD or cyber attack, a future such attack to create massive social, political and economic costs casualties cannot be ruled out.

Countering the Asymmetrical Threat

Applying Lessons Learned

Asymmetrical warfare is as old as recorded history, and lessons have inevitably been learned at each stage of its evolution. Modern asymmetrical warfare has evolved primarily since the beginning of the Cold War in the wake of World War II. The first major post-war insurgency of note occurred in Malaya where the British waged a twelve year counter-insurgency campaign (1948-1960). The British finally succeeded in putting down the insurgency by adopting of a joint civilian-military strategy that combined regaining and maintaining civil order with winning hearts and minds of non-combatant supporters of the insurgents.[6]

The strategic components for how effectively to counter asymmetrical threats are well known and understood by most professionals. The absence of a new, comprehensive and integrated grand strategic vision, therefore, is not due to the lack of lessons learned. It is due more to the reluctance to change entrenched, outdated national security policy mindsets and also to inefficiencies created by internal bureaucratic politics.

Outdated National Security Policy Mindsets

There is still a strong predilection to view asymmetrical warfare as a low intensive subcategory of military conflict in general. This mindset substantially reinforces the mindset that overwhelming military superiority alone can effectively counter asymmetrical threats.

Leaving aside the fact that asymmetrical warfare can involve conventional as well as unconventional tactics and could potentially adopt WMD tactics, a conventional military mindset is inadequate in countering asymmetrical threats. While it is theoretically possible to pacify asymmetrical adversaries and their supporters through a strategy of tactics of restricted brutality

and ferocity, in reality the use of such a strategy is not only proscribed by international law, but more important, it would be virtually certain to be psychologically counter-productive in the war on hearts and minds. In short, asymmetrical threats cannot be countered successfully by armed force alone.

Internal Bureaucratic Politics and Rivalries

Due to the multifaceted nature of asymmetrical warfare, a successful strategic vision to counter it requires the integration of a wide variety of capabilities, and close cooperation and coordination among an unprecedented number of bureaucracies of many agencies and services—civilian and military, covert and overt, public and private, domestic and foreign—which have those capabilities.

Achieving an integrated strategic vision is a major challenge. Each bureaucracy has its own unique institutional professional capabilities, turf, missions, institutional cultures, personnel systems and career tracks; collectively they have many overlapping capabilities and independent and at times competing missions and responsibilities. Nevertheless, changing outdated mindsets and overcoming bureaucratic politics and rivalries is vital. Failure adequately to achieve them could be the difference between success and failure in meeting the threat.

Applying Basic Assumptions

The following are some basic assumptions derived from lessons learned from past experience and from the current state of evolution of asymmetrical warfare:

The Grand Strategic Vision must be Multi-Faceted

Because asymmetrical warfare are multifaceted and international in scope, a counter strategy involves must utilize multiple capabilities from multiple sources, civilian and military, public and private.

The Grand Strategic Vision Must be Comprehensive, Integrated, Coordinated, and Cooperative, and Where Appropriate, International

Because of overlapping capabilities, missions and jurisdictions, no single agency, company or government can successfully exercise exclusive responsibility or control for all the assets required.

The Organizational Structure Under the Chief Official Must Maximize Coordination and Cooperation at Every Level

The organizational structure must incorporate horizontal as well as vertical coordination and cooperation at every level to ensure adequate managerial and operational coordination, particularly where bureaucratic capabilities overlap.

Overall Responsibility for a Counter Strategy must Reside at the Highest Senior Level of Government

That official must have the power, delegated from the chief executive, to insure adequate coordination and cooperation. At the sane time, his principal task is to coordinate, not to manage the operations of the agencies tasked with specific duties.

The Grand Strategic Vision must be Flexible

Asymmetrical warfare is a constant evolutionary work in progress. It must maintain the flexibility to respond quickly, choosing the most appropriate capabilities required for countering each individual threat.

The Overall Goal of the Grand Strategic Vision Must to Provide a Blue Print for Reducing Asymmetrical Threats to Manageable Proportions, Not to Try to Eradicate Them

All countries have their own political processes, cultures, environments and bureaucratic structures. Strategic plans in response to asymmetrical threats must therefore be tailored to meet individual country needs. But all countries face a common asymmetrical threat regardless of the idiosyncrasies of specific threats, and it has become increasingly clear since the turning of the 21st century that asymmetrical conflicts have evolved into a major national and international security threat.

At the same time, the means for waging asymmetrical warfare are too cheap, too available, and too tempting to be permanently eradicated, and resources required to counter it are not infinite. The most realistic goal, therefore, is to reduce threat level to a level that can enable societies to live normal lives free from fear and intimidation.

Key Strategic Elements of a New Strategic Vision

The strategic capabilities, responsibilities and operations required in countering the threat are tasked differently from country to country. Moreover, tasking is often shared or overlaps among multiple agencies and services. Regardless of whatever government organizational are in place or created to counter asymmetrical threats, however, all counter strategies must contain nine key elements. They are psychological programs, diplomacy, intelligence, military force, covert special operations, law enforcement, protective security, emergency crisis management and reconstruction assistance.

Psychological Programs

Because the strategic objective of asymmetrical combatants is psychological, the strategic objective of a counter strategy must also be psychological, to undermine and if possible reverse the will of the enemy to continue the conflict. Given the fanaticism of most asymmetrical groups and individual combatants, the focus of psychological programs should be primarily on denying them support and participation of those among the general predisposed to have common cause with them. No asymmetrical group can long exist without some degree of public sympathy and support.

In what is essentially a battle for gaining and intimidating hearts and minds, the comparative advantage lies with the asymmetrical groups, which is why asymmetrical warfare has become increasingly popular as a strategy of last resort against far more powerful adversaries. Efforts of asymmetrical organizations to demonize their adversaries are complementary with their efforts to win supporters from disaffected people predisposed to seek a target as the cause of their pain.

The key to the success of such psychological programs is credibility. This is an extremely difficult goal to achieve. Winning hearts and minds from the enemy and gaining political support for waging a counter asymmetrical threat are often at cross purposes due to incompatible domestic and foreign policy interests.

For those reasons, three basic elements are vital for a successful psychological counter strategy. First, they must be conducted by all the other strategic elements. The most formal are public diplomacy programs, but all the other elements must include public relations programs to win and maintain public support for their activities. Second, all these efforts must be coordinated to maintain credibility. Third, all programs must be proactive as much if not more than reactive. Winning hearts and minds away from an adversary is far more difficult than winning them in the first place, and once lost, the chances of a peaceful resolution of the conflict can be next to nothing. And words must be matched by deeds. Otherwise, words are likely to be counterproductive.

Diplomacy

Due to the international scope and transnational reach of asymmetrical warfare, no single country can meet a major asymmetrical threat unilaterally. Diplomacy therefore must play a leading role in seeking, maintaining and participating in multinational and bilateral cooperation at the senior political levels of foreign governments and in facilitating cooperation and cooperation with counterpart agencies and companies. In countering asymmetrical warfare, a major goal is to create and maintain an international consensus that asymmetrical warfare is not just the concern of countries facing a specific threat; it is a global concern of all countries.

Intelligence

Because asymmetrical operations are covert, good, timely intelligence collection analysis and dissemination and sharing is absolutely necessary. To defeat the enemy, it is vital to identify asymmetrical adversaries, their locations, assets, capabilities, intentions, and targets.

Intelligence collection, analysis are the shared responsibility of civilian and military, law enforcement and security and intelligence services. Not only is cooperation and sharing among all domestic elements crucial, but liaison with foreign intelligence services is also of major importance against multinational adversaries.

Military Force

The primary role in the use of military force has traditionally been to combat counter-military force. Over the past half century, however, it has increasingly become involved in counter insurgency operations when national security is threatened, including restoring and maintaining public order and assisting in public relief programs.

Although strategic objectives differ greatly, there is no sharp line of distinction between operational tactics used in asymmetrical and conventional or unconventional warfare. And although there is as yet no precedent, there is also a possibility of a terrorist WMD attack at some time in the future.

A second role of the military is maintaining civil order and public safety in conditions beyond the capability of law enforcement to manage, and pacification in insurgency situations. If insurgencies are sufficiently successful to challenge the enemy militarily, it is no longer asymmetrical warfare. The use of armed force in countering asymmetrical warfare, therefore, is not simply to defeat an enemy militarily on the battlefield. The broader objective is to neutralize the enemy's ability to achieve its political agenda through a psychological campaign of fear and intimidation.

Special Covert Operations

Covert action and special operations are important elements in countering covert asymmetrical warfare. They include rapid response to incidents and attacks, hostage rescue, and proactive and preemptive strikes against asymmetrical combatants and materiel. Special operations units are generally military, but in some cases they can be tasked to or shared with intelligence, law enforcement, and protective security services.

Law Enforcement

Because virtually all asymmetrical warfare involves criminal activity, law enforcement services play a crucial role in countering asymmetrical threats. They have responsibility for a wide range of activities, including police, public safety and public security, forensics, criminal investigations, riot control and crisis and emergency management of civil disobedience.

Responsibility for maintaining normal public safety and security is generally shared by several national and local civilian law enforcement and public security services and agencies. In crisis situations including an outbreak of terrorist activity and/or a major insurgency, these responsibilities must often be shared with military services, including special operations and counter-insurgency units.

In meeting the law enforcement and public security needs in countering asymmetrical threats, therefore, a counter strategy must integrate and coordinate the efforts and responsibilities of all law enforcement and public security services, and where called for, include appropriate military units as required. If the threat is international in scope, it must also achieve international cooperation and coordination with Interpol and among states and with counterpart agencies abroad.

Protective Security

Protective security is defined here as providing security from criminal activities including asymmetrical attacks against persons and facilities, installations and equipment, including transportation, electronic and cyber equipment. Given the international scope and multifaceted scope of asymmetrical warfare, it is virtually impossible to achieve total protective security. Targets requiring significant public access or provide significant public services are particularly attractive for terrorist organizations as they provide an opportunity for broad mass media coverage.

Public access and security comprise a zero-sum game; the more there is of one, the less there is of the other. Where public access is necessary, protective security requires seeking and optimum balance between the two.

Emergency Crisis Management

The role of emergency crisis management extends far beyond asymmetrical threats, including, for example major natural disasters. In either case, however they require rapid responses and longer term public safety and security. To the extent that crises and emergencies can be attributed to asymmetrical attacks, however, it is necessary for agencies tasked such responsibility to be represented in a comprehensive grand strategy. Not only would that insure better coordination and cooperation with many those responsible for many of the other elements grand strategy

elements such as law enforcement, security and armed forces, but it would provided an early threat warning that could make them better prepared.

Reconstruction Assistance

In cases where a country has sustained damage seriously endangering its health and welfare of the general public and economic viability, reconstruction aid can be a key element in undermining hostility of a bereft population. Care must be taken, however, to avoid political influence and/or unethical business ethics to undermine the economic goals of reconstruction lest they be used to regain support by discredited asymmetrical groups.

Conclusions

From the above discussion, it should be clear that the strategic vision proposed here is not intended to be an all-purpose formula for countering all specific asymmetrical threats. Each country must create a strategy tailored to meet its specific domestic capabilities and political costs and benefits, and be flexible enough to address the specific requirements for successfully countering the specific threats facing it. With the advances in technology and the effects of continued future shock due to rapid modernization, particularly those facing but not limited to traditional societies, strategic plans must constantly be modified to meet evolving challenges.

The intention here has been to identify the broad elements of modern asymmetrical warfare that all countries must face, and the strategic framework required to address them successfully. It is hoped however, that this grand strategic vision can provide an efficient and workable framework for how best national security strategy for meeting what is likely to be an ongoing, evolving international national security threat.

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