

**Zeitschrift:** ASMZ : Sicherheit Schweiz : Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Offiziersgesellschaft  
**Band:** 175 (2009)  
**Heft:** 08

**Artikel:** Asymmetric strategies  
**Autor:** Bühlmann, Christian  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-355>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 15.09.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Asymmetric strategies

## A concept to better understand modern conflicts?

Many models have been proposed to explain the transformation of the use of force as an instrument of policies, announcing the end of conventional war, its transformation or the apparition of new variants of it. In parallel, the concept of asymmetry is used pervasively in literature. Yet, it does suffer from an excess of diverse, contradictory definitions. Several pundits have even contested its applicability and usefulness. How can this concept help ascertaining the characteristics of contemporary conflicts?

Christian Bühlmann

Ingénieur informaticien diplômé (Ecole Polytechnique fédérale, Lausanne), M.A. in Security Studies (King's College, London), officier de carrière, Colonel EMG, Officier supérieure adjoint du Chef de l'Armée, 3003 Bern. E-Mail: christian.buehlmann@vtg.admin.ch

### 1. The nature of asymmetry strategies<sup>[1]</sup>

*Est asymétrique  
ce que l'on ne comprend pas.*<sup>[2]</sup>

Opening the *Rencontres du Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces (CDEF)* in 2006, General Vincent Desportes, asserts that "war has not changed"; yet, he continues, its shapes, capacities and functions have been amended, implying a transformation of the use of force as an instrument of policies.<sup>[3]</sup>

Many models have been proposed to explain those modification, announcing the end of conventional war, its transformation or the apparition of new variants of it. In parallel, the concept of asymmetry is used pervasively in literature.<sup>[4]</sup> Yet, it does suffer from an excess of diverse, contradictory definitions. Several pundits have even contested its applicability and usefulness.<sup>[5]</sup> How can this concept help ascertaining the characteristics of contemporary conflicts?

Chapter 1 offers a critique of current definitions of asymmetry and a typology of asymmetric strategies based on Herfried Münkler's *Der Wandel des Krieges*.<sup>[6]</sup> Chapter 2 presents a model of modern conflicts, on the basis of 'canonical' works. Finally, chapter 3 shows how this typology can provide a better understanding of modern conflicts, as well as its limits.

To paraphrase Sun Tzu, all conflict is based on imbalance. Only minor and highly ritual forms of struggle, such as sport,

tournaments, or duels, are based on a strict symmetry – not understood in terms of numbers, but in terms of similarity and defined through norms and regulations. As soon as the ends become important, there is an incentive to break this symmetry. Challenging those norms in order to win thus represents the essence of asymmetry. One would therefore expect warfare to lose symmetry very fast. Yet, conventional wars have always been fairly symmetrical, whereas, in modern conflicts, there is a stronger tendency to use or create imbalances.

In this chapter, the current official definition of asymmetry in the U.S. and the U.K. will first be presented and their limitations exposed. Second, an encompassing framework of asymmetric strategies, based on Münkler's differentiation of symmetry and asymmetry, will be provided. This framework will allow a discussion of this concept in the third chapter.

### A short history of the concept of asymmetry

The concept and the study of asymmetry are primarily of American origin.<sup>[7]</sup> Therefore, the major part of this section is dedicated to the official U.S. view on asymmetry. The remainder describes sketchily the British approaches.<sup>[8]</sup> Finally, a critique of the current definitions of asymmetry is provided.

#### *The U.S. view*<sup>[9]</sup>

The notion of asymmetry entered the U.S. military doctrine in 1995. The *Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States* described 'asymmetric engagements' as 'battles between dissimilar forces', giving 'air versus land (such as the air attack of land targets ...)' as an example thereof.<sup>[10]</sup> Those ideas were further elaborated by General Ronald Fogleman. They led him to foresee a "new American way of war", an "asymmetric force" strategy using the US technological advantage to eschew attrition warfare and conflicts based on direct confrontation.<sup>[11]</sup>

This positive perception changed soon after: In the 1997 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, Secretary of Defence William Cohen, alluded to 'asymmetric means' (ballistic missiles, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and information warfare) that an adversary could use to "circumvent or undermine our strengths while exploiting our vulnerabilities", either within or without a classical conflict. He further spoke of 'asymmetric challenges', such as targeting U.S. forces weaknesses and of 'asymmetric attacks'.<sup>[12]</sup>

This negative and normative view of asymmetry was exemplified in the *1998 Strategic Assessment* published by the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the U.S. National Defense University:

*Put simply, asymmetric threats or techniques are a version of not "fighting fair," which can include the use of surprise in all its operational and strategic dimensions and the use of weapons in ways unplanned by the United States. Not fighting fair also includes the prospect of an opponent designing a strategy that fundamentally alters the terrain on which a conflict is fought.*<sup>[13]</sup>

This kind of disparity reappears in the 1999 U.S. Joint Strategy Review, where 'asymmetric approaches' are described, pursuing "to circumvent or undermine US strengths while exploiting US weaknesses using methods that differ significantly from the United States' expected method of operations". They encompass all levels of warfare "across the spectrum of military operations".<sup>[14]</sup>

Similarly, in *Joint Vision 2020*, published in 2000, the Joint Chiefs of Staff pointed to both imbalance and ontological disparities. "The appeal of asymmetric approaches (...) that avoid US strengths and exploit potential vulnerabilities using significantly different methods of operation" was recognised as one of the major threats to the U.S.<sup>[15]</sup>

The 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, based partially on reports written before 9/11, makes numerous references to asymmetry as state sponsored threats but, additionally, as an U.S. way of war.

The "non-traditional, asymmetric challenges of this new century", are addressed in the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review*. They possess three dimensions: "irregular warfare (conflicts in which enemy combatants are not regular military forces of nation-states); catastrophic terrorism employing weapons of mass destruction (WMD); and disruptive threats to the United States' ability to maintain its qualitative edge and to project power".<sup>[16]</sup>

To sum up, before 9/11, the concept of asymmetry was "largely linked to proper war, serving as an argument for missile defence. It was not linked to 'small-scale contingencies'".<sup>[17]</sup> Thomas P. M. Barnett, professor at the U.S. Naval War College and former Pentagon analyst, justifies "the rise of asymmetrical warfare" pre-9/11 as an answer to the disappearance of the Red Army and the need to answer to a credible threat, thus giving good reason for the preservation of a high level of defence budgets.<sup>[18]</sup> After 9/11, it describes new concepts of insurrection within the Global War on Terrorism. Still, the US concept of asymme-

- 
- [1] This article, has been written during the 2007 *Royal College of Defence Studies* Course. I am grateful to my then advisor, Dr Warren Chin, for his invaluable comments and suggestions, to Dominique Andrey, Professor Jack Spence and Alain Vuitel for their very useful remarks, as well as to Annemarie Innes and Madeleine Williams for proofreading. The bibliography can be provided on request.
- [2] "Asymmetric is what can't be grasped". Jean-Jacques Paltry and Jean-Luc Marret, *Les Forces terrestres en opération: Quels modes d'actions adopter face à des adversaires asymétriques*, Cahiers de la recherche doctrinale (Paris: Centre de doctrine d'emploi des forces, 2004) 20.
- [3] Vincent Desportes, "L'adieu aux armes: anticiper et gérer la sortie de crise" *Doctrine*, no. 01 (Numéro spécial) (2007) 3.
- [4] See for instance the bibliography on asymmetric warfare compiled by Joan T. Phillips, *Asymmetric warfare* (July 2006 [cited 22.1.2007]); available from <http://www.au.af.mil/au/aul/bibs/asw.htm>.
- [5] Lawrence Freedman, "The Third World War?" *Survival* 43, no. 4 (2001): 71. Steven Lambakis et al., "Understanding 'Asymmetric' Threats to the United States" *Comparative Strategy* 21, no. 4 (October 2002). Colin S Gray, "Thinking Asymmetrically in Times of Terror" *Parameters* XXXII, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 14. Stephen Blank, "Rethinking the Concept of Asymmetric Threats in U.S. Strategy" *Comparative Strategy* 23, no. 4 (2004). Stephen D. Pomper, *Asymmetric: Myth in United States Military Doctrine* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Command and General Staff College, June 2004) 40.
- [6] Herfried Münkler, *Der Wandel des Krieges: von der Symmetrie zur Asymmetrie* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wiss., 2006).
- [7] J. G. Eaton, "The beauty of asymmetry: An examination of the context and practice of asymmetric and unconventional warfare from a Western/Centrist perspective" *Defence Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002), Paltry and Marret, *op.cit.*
- [8] The French approach distinguishes symmetry (similarity in resources and structure), dissymmetry (imbalance in resources or structure) and asymmetry (dissimilarity in ends and ontology), Colonel Cholley, "Nouvelles techniques, nouvelles menaces" *Doctrine*, no. 09 (2006): 13. This separation has not been fully understood in the anglo-saxon community, as explained for instance by John Russell, "Asymmetric Warfare" in *The Big Issue: Command And Combat In The Information Age (A View From Upavon)* ed. David Potts (London: The Strategic And Combat Studies Institute, 2002), 119. However, a comparison with other concepts is beyond the scope of this paper.
- [9] The following paragraphs draw on Steven Metz and Douglas V. Johnson II, *Asymmetry and US Military Strategy: Definition, Background, and Strategic Concepts* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2001) 2-6, Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, vol. 45 *Adelphi* (London: Routledge 2006) 52-54, Eaton, *op.cit.*, Pomper, *op.cit.*
- [10] Joint Publication 1, "Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States" (1995), IV-10.
- [11] Quoted in John T. Correll, "Casualties" *Air Force Magazine* 86, no. 6 (June 2003): 49.
- [12] Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, *Report of The Quadrennial Defense Review* (1997), Section II.
- [13] Hans Binnendijk et al., *Strategic Assessment 1998 - Engaging Power for Peace* (1998 [cited 22.5. 2007]); available from <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Strategic%20Assessments/sa98/sa98ch11.html>.
- [14] *Joint Strategy Review 1999*, (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 1999) 2. in Metz and Johnson II, *op.cit.* 5.
- [15] Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Vision 2020* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000).
- [16] Secretary of Defense Ronald Rumsfeld, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: 2006) 3.
- [17] Freedman, *Transformation* 53.
- [18] Thomas P.M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map - War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New-York: Berkley Books, 2004) 89-96.



try is Janus-like: on one hand, following a Manichean view, it describes how a “wicked” adversary could use asymmetric strategies to target US weaknesses. On the other, it represents opportunities for the US to fight an adversary on its own terms, using its technological superiority.

### Thomas P. M. Barnett, professor at the U.S. Naval War College and former Pentagon analyst, justifies “the rise of asymmetrical warfare” pre-9/11 as an answer to the disappearance of the Red Army ...

#### *The British View*

The UK already integrated the notion of asymmetry in 1998, when *The Strategic Defence Review* (SDR) stated that *our potential adversaries may choose to adopt alternative weapons and unconventional (or ‘asymmetric’) strategies, perhaps attacking us through vulnerabilities in our open civil societies.*<sup>[19]</sup>

The adaptation of this document, published in 2002, amended this notion:

*Whereas the SDR saw these potential asymmetric threats as one of a range of tactics that an adversary might use, the attacks on the US on 11 September have shown that such action has the potential for strategic effect.*<sup>[20]</sup>

On the operational level of war, the Joint Doctrine Publication 01, *Joint Operations*, states that “faced with the conventional military advantage of the US and its allies, states and non-state actors will be forced to use asymmetries in will, endurance, morality and agility to circumvent and deny use of that advantage”, further noting that “asymmetry should not be viewed as ‘warfare of the weak’. The dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima during WW2 is an example of asymmetry used to gain strategic leverage”.<sup>[21]</sup>

*Joint Operations Execution*, Joint Warfare Publication 3-00 (JWP 3-00), goes beyond that definition and expands the definition of asymmetry: Observing that few opponents will attack stronger armed forces on their (symmetric) rules, it is assumed that they will rather attack weaknesses. Therefore, it is necessary to identify and protect them.

The UK understanding of asymmetry differs between the levels of war: At strategic level, asymmetry amounts to delivering strategic effects against British vulnerabilities. At the operational level, it is seen as a way to challenge the Western capabilities, using unconventional strategies, different moral norms, or unusual means.

#### *Criticism of the concepts of asymmetry*

The concept of asymmetry has been subject to wide criticisms. This sub-section discusses three relevant points of contention:<sup>[22]</sup>

First, asymmetry is generally defined as “targeting allied weaknesses”. However, aiming vulnerabilities is standard military practice and a tenet of Basil Liddell Hart’s indirect

strategy.<sup>[23]</sup> JWP 3-00 states that ‘asymmetry, a concept at the heart of the manoeuvrist mentality, (...) seeks to apply disproportionate strength against weakness’.<sup>[24]</sup> If the concept of asymmetry is similar to existing ones, why use it?

Second, and more generally, as physical imbalance is a generic component of warfare, asymmetry seems to describe an obvious point of military practice.<sup>[25]</sup> As Colin Gray expresses bluntly, “because all warfare is asymmetrical (there are no sets of identical belligerents), in effect no particular wars or warfare is distinctly so”.<sup>[26]</sup>

Third, the concept of asymmetry has been used for so many different uses that it has become empty:<sup>[27]</sup> “Judging by the multiple applications of the term in military journals”, recalls Lieutenant-Colonel Timothy Thomas “–‘not fighting fair’, ‘attacking a weak point’, ‘information or cyberwar’, ‘public relations war’, ‘weapons of mass destruction’– very few people understand asymmetry’s formal definition”.<sup>[28]</sup>

Actually, those criticisms do not apply to the concept of asymmetry itself, but to the lack of a clear definition thereof. They do not address the fact that many western authors still use this notion to describe their perceptions or experiences in Afghanistan or in Iraq.<sup>[29]</sup> Asymmetry must hence be reassessed,

### Asymmetry must hence be reassessed, not as an attack on weaknesses, but rather according to Münkler’s differentiation.

not as an attack on weaknesses, but rather according to Münkler’s differentiation. This is the subject of the following section.

#### **Symmetrisation in warfare**

In practice, whereas one could have expected wars to lose their balanced nature, a number of regulations, mostly originating in the classical Western way of warfare, have kept the symmetry going. This, explains Münkler, comes from the structure of the Westphalian order, which is based on a clear differentiation between interstate and intrastate (civil) wars. The former is defined as “a form of war and warfare that can be politically and legally regulated”.<sup>[30]</sup> These regulations have both a political and moral character:

- Politically, according to Münkler, symmetry in interstate wars is a necessity: In case of a defeat, it allows for the preservation of the state’s existence, possibly less a part of its territory, as a small war or an insurgency against the adversary could have also threatened the state.<sup>[31]</sup> Therefore, “symmetrical wars are political artworks, through which the contending parties are hampered to be attracted to an asymmetrisation of the conflict by a complete set of gratifications and sanctions”.<sup>[32]</sup>
- On the issue of morality, there is long tradition of western fair fighting, dating back to the ancient Greeks, who loathed non-conventional combat practices.<sup>[33]</sup> Later, during the late Antiquity, Augustine of Hippo, realizing that, to allow for the development of Christianity, the Roman Em-



Component	Characteristics
Physical	Means to fight such as manpower, equipment, collective performance, readiness and sustainability
Conceptual	Provides the thought process needed to develop the ability to fight for today (principles of war and doctrine) and tomorrow (conceptual thinking centred on fundamental defence capabilities)
Moral	Persuading our people to fight through motivation, leadership and management.

[11]

pire had to prevail against the Barbarian threat, developed the concept of *just war* as a way for pacifist-orientated Christians to defend a “civilisation under attack”.<sup>[34]</sup> Just war has been further refined through the centuries, notably by Thomas Aquinas and Hugo Grotius. The latter defined conditions for the conduct of war, *jus in bello*, that has to be waged by just means without harm to non-combatants. These norms have influenced the international laws of war.

### Categories of asymmetric strategies

Classical warfare is symmetrical because it must be regulated. Hence, to carry on with Münkler, “the remainder of wars that can neither be normed nor regulated” are characterised by asymmetry, dissimilarities between the actors. Münkler further differentiates (1) asymmetry from strength (*Asymmetrie*), when an actor uses overwhelming capabilities and (2) asymmetry from weakness (*Asymmetrierung*), by a weaker actor that negates those overpowering capabilities.<sup>[35]</sup> Yet, those definitions are too broad. In order to understand those dissimilarities, a typology of asymmetric strategies has to be defined. A number of propositions has been provided, but most of them are related to tactical level.<sup>[36]</sup> Thus, this essay presents yet another typology, assuming that the goal of the asymmetric strategies is to cope with the adversary’s power. To simplify, we assume that power is fungible and can be reduced to military power. Military power is to be understood as an actor’s ability to control or influence other actors or the outcome of events using military means.<sup>[37]</sup> Asymmetric strategies seek therefore to control, influence or shape actors’ use of military means crafting, or exploiting, different forms of imbalance, in effect denying the adversary’s forces “ability to fight and achieve success in operations”,<sup>[38]</sup> so that they cannot produce strategic effects.<sup>[39]</sup>

The “ability to fight and achieve success in operations” is defined as fighting power, which British doctrine characterises with physical, conceptual and moral components.<sup>[40]</sup>

- [19] Ministry of Defence White Paper, *Security Priorities in a Changing World, The Strategic Defence Review* (London: HMSO, 1998) Chapter 2, alinea 34.
- [20] Ministry of Defence White Paper, *The Strategic Defence Review: A New Chapter* (London: HMSO, 2002) 6-7.
- [21] *Joint Operations, Joint Doctrine Publication 01* (Shrivenham, UK: Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre, 2004) 1-4.
- [22] For a more detailed criticism of the US concept of asymmetry, see Lambakis et al., *op.cit.* See also Blank, *op.cit.*
- [23] Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York, N.Y.: Meridian, 1967 [1991]) 335.
- [24] *Joint Operations Execution, Joint Warfare Publication 3-00* (Shrivenham, UK: Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre, 2004) 1-11.
- [25] Gray, *op.cit.*, Blank, *op.cit.* 346 - 347, Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force - The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005) 373.
- [26] Gray, *op.cit.*
- [27] Lambakis et al., *op.cit.*, Blank, *op.cit.*, Pomper, *op.cit.* 40, Freedman, *Third World War* 71.
- [28] Timothy L. Thomas, “Deciphering Asymmetry’s Word Game” *Military Review* 2001, July-August 32.
- [29] See, for instance, Joan T. Phillips, *op.cit.* This compilation refers to 11 internet resources, 33 books, 46 documents and 148 periodical articles, mostly published since 2002.
- [30] Münkler, *op.cit.* 32.
- [31] *Ibid.* 62-63.
- [32] *Ibid.* 60
- [33] Michael A O’Halloran, *A Kill Is a Kill: Asymmetrically Attacking United States Airpower* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1999) 2.
- [34] Münkler, *op.cit.* 272 - 273.
- [35] *Ibid.* 65 - 74.
- [36] See a discussion in Eaton, *op.cit.* 53 - 54.
- [37] Definition based on Martin Griffiths and Terry O’Callaghan, *International relations: the key concepts* (London Routledge, 2002) 253.
- [38] *British Defence Doctrine, Joint Warfare Publication 0-01* (Shrivenham, UK: Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre, 2001) 4-1.
- [39] „Effects-based operations are coordinated sets of actions directed at shaping the behavior of friends, neutrals, and foes in peace, crisis, and war”. Edward Allen Smith Jr, *Effects Based Operations: Applying Network-Centric Warfare in Peace, Crisis, and War* (DoD Command and Control Research Program (CCRP) Publications, 2002) 108.
- [40] JWP 0-001, *op.cit.*, 4-1 - 4-7.

[11] British components of Fighting Power.

Stretching this definition, we can define a typology of four asymmetric strategies:

#### *Strategies based on physical asymmetry*

Physical asymmetry is based on differences in resources, spaces, capability and technology. Asymmetry from strength is, for instance, the US 'command of the common',<sup>[41]</sup> whereas asymmetry from weakness can be reached through disappearing under the opponent's ISTAR threshold,<sup>[42]</sup> or by using information operations to destabilise him.

#### *Strategies based on conceptual asymmetry*

Conceptual asymmetry denotes doctrinal imbalance, such as, for instance, a difference in "war generation",<sup>[43]</sup> or the use of different methods, such as direct or indirect approaches. Ivan Arreguín-Toft's *How the Weak Win Wars*<sup>[44]</sup> addresses different strategies to explain the outcome of conflicts between different actors. Several examples of small wars, have demonstrated that weak actors 'win wars against much stronger adversaries when they can adopt and maintain an ideal counterstrategy': an asymmetric strategy.<sup>[45]</sup>

#### *Strategies based on willpower asymmetry*

Strategies based on willpower asymmetry search to deny the fighting motivation to the military and the nation, respectively to the combatants and their supporters. Alexander Mack's seminal article analysing the outcome of the Vietnam and Algerian wars, *Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars*,<sup>[46]</sup> explains the results of small wars with the asymmetry of interests between a stronger actor, who leads a war of choice and a weaker one, who wages a war of survival. This asymmetry leads generally to the stronger losing the conflicts, as its will to fight a protracted struggle diminishes faster than its challenger's.

#### *Strategies based on ontological asymmetry*

The former three asymmetries relate broadly to armed forces resources. Yet, adversaries may try to defeat western forces using western social restraints patterns against violence.<sup>[47]</sup> Joseph Henrotin and Tanguy de Swielande suggest therefore that the political and ontological dimension of war must not be forgotten, as future adversaries will not be symmetrical.<sup>[48]</sup>

*The occidental culture of zero death, the attempts of minimizing collateral damage in operations, the respect of (our) laws, the moral restraints or the strict rules of engagement are some typical figures of the post-modern evolution of our societies. (...) The enemy has, like Victor Davis Hanson puts it, "mastered the knowledge of the Western mind".*<sup>[49]</sup>

For the enemies of Western societies, the latter's values represent therefore a weakness they can use in their struggle. Therefore, so de Swielande, ontological asymmetry, "is a confrontation between military, political, social and organisational systems with different logics"<sup>[50]</sup>

### **Synthesis**

This chapter has discussed the Anglo-Saxon understanding of asymmetry and proposes a re-examination under the prospect of the disappearance of norms. Then, four types of asymmetry have been presented, which allow adversaries to confront their challenger's power. Integrating mainstream

theories of asymmetry, such as Mack's and Arreguín-Toft's, they are of practical use and can be used to assess the outcome of courses of action.

Table 2 summarises them and provides a few examples. These elements will be reapplied in the third chapter, integrated into the characteristics of modern conflicts that will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **2. Modern conflicts**

The limitations of the Cold War's strategic theories to explain modern conflicts appeared soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as Martin van Creveld's *Transformation of War* discloses.<sup>[51]</sup> The literature on contemporary conflicts has since become extremely comprehensive<sup>[52]</sup> and synthesising all the opposing accounts would amount to a ludicrous exercise. By selecting a couple of different positions on modern conflicts instead, a metaphorical "theory triangulation"<sup>[53]</sup> can be generated, which allows for a better grasp of the nature of modern conflicts. Subsequently, this section presents a selection of descriptions and an explanation of contemporary conflicts. In order to provide an integrated view of those propositions, a framework proposed by Robert Cooper, a British diplomat and researcher, will be described in the following section.

### **Global aspects**

According to Cooper, a "new world order" has emerged out of the Cold War. In the *Breaking of Nations*,<sup>[54]</sup> he describes its three categories of worlds:

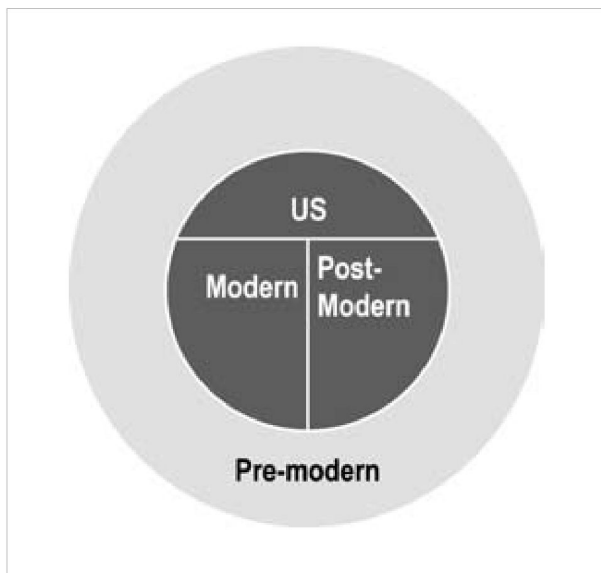
1. The *pre-modern world* includes states that cannot impose order on their territory because they have lost the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force. For Cooper, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Liberia are part of the pre-modern world. The weakness of the state allows for the rise of tough and unpredictable non-state actors, such as terrorist, felon or drug dealing, organised groups. They may threaten other parts of the world when chaos, instigated within, spills-over without.<sup>[55]</sup>
2. Force and interests, but also risks and order, dominate the modern world. The monopoly on the use of force is a definite attribute of the States, which use it to balance power and as a basis for their security. Russia, India and China, for instance, belong to the modern world.
3. Finally, the post-modern world represents a system where the states have imploded through the creation of a supra-national regime. Yet, this limitation of sovereignty does not engender chaos, but stimulates order. The European Union belongs to the post-modern world.

In this respect, the U.S. has a particular position, being a modern state with its security focus based on independence, as well as a post-modern one in its desire to promote values such as democracy (see table 3).

As the risk of conflicts within the post-modern world has disappeared and the economic linkage within the modern world and with the post-modern world renders war between them less likely, most conflicts will take place within the pre-modern world and may spill-over to the rest of the world. Therefore, the modern and post-modern worlds are bound to intervene to enforce order. The following chapter describes those new conflicts.

Type of asymmetry	Examples	
	Stronger to weaker	Weaker to Stronger
Physical	Overwhelming firepower. Precision, long distance strikes. Control of the commons.	Dispersion, Conflict waged amongst the people, Action below the "ISTAR threshold", Use of media and propaganda.
Conceptual	Effects-based, Network Centric Warfare, Manoeuvre Warfare.	Attrition, Strategic adjustment, Fourth Generation War.
Willpower	Fast operation tempo and short campaign duration to avoid loss of support.	High will power due to the nature of war of survival leading to protracted conflict.
Ontological	Just War, Western Way of War.	"Unlimited Warfare" Chinese "Unrestricted warfare".

[2]



[3]

- [41] Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony" *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003).
- [42] „A force's ISTAR threshold is the level of enemy activity it can detect in a given environment." Chief of Army's Senior Advisory Committee, *Complex Warfighting* (sl: The Australian Army, 2004) 6.
- [43] On war generations, see William Lind et al., "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation" *Marine Corps Gazette* (October 1989).
- [44] Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- [45] *Ibid.* 200. In this case, an asymmetric strategy is, for instance, to respond to a direct strategy with an indirect strategy.
- [46] Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict" *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (Jan 1975).
- [47] See, for instance, Ralph Peters, "The New Warrior Class" *Parameters* XXIV (Summer 1994).
- [48] Joseph Henrotin and Tanguy Struye de Swielande, "Ontological-Cultural Asymmetry and the Relevance of Grand Strategies" *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 7, no. 2 (Winter 2004).
- [49] *Ibid.* 10.
- [50] Tanguy Struye de Swielande, "L'asymétrie instrumentale et ontologico-stratégique dans l'après guerre froide" *Arès* XXI no. 54 / 2 (Janvier 2005) 113 - 114.
- [51] Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, (New York: The Free Press, 1991).
- [52] See, for instance, Heinz-Jürgen Axt et al., *Conflict – a literature review* (Duisburg: Universität Duisburg Essen, Department of Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science, 2006).
- [53] Robert Yin, *Case Study Research - Design and Methods*, 3rd ed., vol. 5, *Applied Social Research Methods Series* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003) 97.
- [54] Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).
- [55] Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict" *International Security* 26, no. 1 (Summer 2001).

[2] Examples of asymmetric strategies.

[3] Graphical representation of Cooper's 'New World Order'.



### On modern wars

At this point, four major descriptions of modern conflicts are offered. Their selection is based on their recognition by supporters and challengers of the notion of modern conflicts.<sup>[56]</sup> They are: (1) Martin van Creveld's "Transformation of War",<sup>[57]</sup> (2) Mary Kaldor's "New Wars",<sup>[58]</sup> (3) General Rupert Smith's "War amongst people",<sup>[59]</sup> and (4) Edward Luttwak's "post-heroic warfare".<sup>[60]</sup> For each description, a summary of the description of modern conflicts and an account of the author's explanation of their origin will be presented. Finally, a synthesis of their main theses is proposed.

#### *The Transformation of War*

The canonical textbook on change in the nature of war, van Creveld's *Transformation of War*<sup>[61]</sup> asserts that major, interstate wars are vanishing, as nuclear weapons have rendered conflicts between countries possessing them pointless. Their relative ease of construction allows any modern or post-modern state to build them if needed. Moreover, international institutions, as well as idealistic norms eschewing wars as a legitimate instrument of policy, have made conventional conflicts worthless. Fuelled by the states' loss of the monopoly of legitimate violence as well as the social fragmentation, low-intensity conflicts (LIC), quite similar to those of the Middle Ages, have (re)appeared. In this context, war is not fought as an instrument of policies, but rather as an instrument of justice, religion or survival.

Summarily, low intensity conflicts are born in the pre-modern world,<sup>[62]</sup> but they may spill over to the modern and the pre-modern worlds.<sup>[63]</sup> They are characterised by a convergence of criminality, terror and organised violence, whereas the boundaries between soldiers, thugs, terrorists and civilians have become blurred.<sup>[64]</sup> The wars of liberation have shown that the weaker can win against the stronger. As "low intensity conflict rise to dominance, much of what has passed for strategy during the last century will be proven useless".<sup>[65]</sup> Conventional Clausewitzian or Jominian strategy, based on geographic elements such as 'lines' or 'fronts' and 'decisive battles', have lost their validity, as low intensity conflicts are not based on them.<sup>[66]</sup> Thus, according to the Israeli historian, contemporary strategic theories have become useless and the Clausewitzian mode of thought has been rendered

**... contemporary strategic theories  
have become useless and the Clausewitzian  
mode of thought has been  
rendered outdated.**

outdated. Therefore, the western military polity must reject its current strategic theories, put aside its modern material and begin to redefine its understanding of war. It must then adapt organisations and procedures to be ready for new methods of warfighting. However, in the process of fighting a polymorphic adversary, "the very process of combating low intensity conflict will cause both sides to become alike", thus initiating change in the polity itself.<sup>[67]</sup> Those major changes challenge not only the armed forces' strategic theories, but the armies themselves, as well as the state.

#### *New and Old Wars*

Professor Mary Kaldor's *New Wars & Old Wars*<sup>[68]</sup> shows that 'Old Wars', the regulated use of force in the context of interstate wars, is a concept of lesser relevance. Instead, 'New Wars' have come to light. They aim at the political enrolment of a specific population group around a common identity, while using ethnic cleansing and corruption to get rid of other ethnic groups.<sup>[69]</sup> 'New Wars' are waged by a mix of guerrilla and counter-insurgency tactics, intending both to gain the "hearts and minds" of the target group and to frighten and create hate against the other parts of the population. It is fought by dispersed and interweaved factions, integrating private security units, bunches of criminals, warlords and their followers, as well as remnants from armies. They use the full spectrum of advanced civilian and security technologies. Not regulated by the international laws on armed conflicts, this kind of warfare is furthermore supported by a global decentralised network of criminal economy. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) is presented by Kaldor as a typical 'New War'. However, these struggles are not restricted to the pre-modern world: some of the violence in the western world (such as in French suburbs) has been related to it.

Kaldor explains 'New Wars' as an outcome of globalisation, a consequence of the developments in transport, as well as in information and communication technologies. This leads towards a world-wide interlocking, triggering polarisations between the local and the global, as well as between integration and fragmentation. Globalisation can destabilize weaker states: the private and public converge, the nation identity is undermined by global values, and the monopoly on the legitimate use of force is diluted by the fading of social links and common norms, as well as the privatisation of violence. Groups try to gain power using identity-based politics. This furthers fragmentation and leads to violence. There is a clear conceptual link between van Creveld's and Kaldor's thesis on the 'non policy' origin of modern conflicts, whereas the latter describes them more precisely.

Finally, Kaldor calls for a revaluation of the current theories, as the limits of "Old Wars" hinder a full understanding of "New Wars": the 'Old Wars' conception, even in its latest dress such as 'Defense Transformation', is still based on WWII experiences; its application to 'New Wars', that can not be solved by military means alone, leads to more insecurity.<sup>[70]</sup> Kaldor proposes a solution based on a "cosmopolitan approach", whose goal is to restore legitimacy, based on a comprehensive rebuilding of the shattered polity.

#### *War amongst the people*

In *The Utility of Force*,<sup>[71]</sup> General Sir Rupert Smith claims that "war no longer exists".<sup>[72]</sup> He explains that "Industrial War", "war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs", has ceased to be.<sup>[73]</sup> Like van Creveld, Smith explains its waning by the development of nuclear weapons, leading to a Kuhnian paradigm shift. Major wars have been replaced by a new paradigm, *War amongst the People*: Wars are no longer waged on the battlefield, in order to reach a political end state through a decisive battle. Instead, the current situation is characterised by enduring conflicts between non state actors, fought in the midst of the population. In this context, conflicts are not an instru-

ment of policy anymore: they do not act as a way to attain a political objective. Rather, they have become an instrument of (violent) politics, i.e. activities and struggles of political actors trying to gain political power – without respect for the constitutional or institutional rules.<sup>[74]</sup> Thus, force must be integrated with all other instruments of power within a comprehensive approach. The utility of force rests in clearly stating to the warring actors that violence is not an option to solve conflicts.

Smith does not detail the structural origin of “War among the people”, only noting that the end of the Cold War allowed frozen conflicts to be tamed.<sup>[75]</sup> However, he describes their characteristics in depth and shows that these struggles can not be resolved by the sole application of force: Using unrestricted force would be politically infeasible and the adversary, acting below the ISTAR threshold, does not represent a target that can be destroyed through manoeuvre or fire.<sup>[76]</sup> Force can no longer be used to create a political end state by defeating the enemy. It is merely an instrument used to create conditions for the resolutions of conflicts. Military theories of war are therefore in need of an update. They must help to limit the use of force where it has a utility, first and foremost to create order. The conventional military strategies are challenged and they must be reconsidered.

#### Post heroic Warfare

Originating in John Keegan’s *Mask of Command*,<sup>[77]</sup> the notion of post-heroism has been popularized by Edward Luttwak.<sup>[78]</sup> Herfried Münkler also provides a consequential analysis of this concept in *Der Wandel des Krieges*.<sup>[79]</sup> Luttwak asserts that “the invariable limiting factor for U.S. military operations is [the post-modern states’] low tolerance of casualties”,<sup>[80]</sup> reinforced by the limited significance of those conflicts in terms of national interests (wars of choice instead of wars of survival). Moreover, it originates from the western countries’ declining demography, which does not allow coping with a large number of casualties. Instead of deploying ground forces on site, western states therefore tend to fight using technology. On the opposite side, less developed societies with a higher rate of birth have a higher readiness to sacrifice.

A framework that describes the western way of waging war without explaining the origin of conflicts, post-heroic warfare challenges the traditional warrior ethos, based on the willingness to sacrifice. Post-modern armies must hence compensate their lack of readiness to sacrifice through technology, in order to keep contenders at distance and to defeat them. The reliance on force protection and firepower by the West in Afghanistan and Iraq validates this thesis.<sup>[81]</sup> However, as soon as an attacker can negate their technological advantage, they may experience strategic crisis.<sup>[82]</sup>

... less developed societies with a higher rate of birth have a higher readiness to sacrifice.

#### Synthesis

Synthesising the main characteristics of modern conflicts,<sup>[83]</sup> the following figure presents the main arguments of modern conflicts and their justifications (see table 4).

[56] As aficionado, see for instance Lind, FMFM 1-A, *Fourth Generation War - Draft* (Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian Marine Corps, sd) 41. As contender, see for instance Colin S.Gray, “Clausewitz, History, and the Future Strategic World” *The Occasional* no. 47 (2004): 8, note 24.

[57] van Creveld, *op.cit.*

[58] Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars - Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

[59] R. Smith, *op.cit.*

[60] Edward N. Luttwak, “Toward Post-Heroic Warfare” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May/June 1995), Edward N. Luttwak, “A Post-Heroic Military Policy” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (1996, July/August).

[61] van Creveld, *op.cit.*

[62] *Ibid.* 11-12.

[63] *Ibid.* 195-196.

[64] *Ibid.* 197-198.

[65] *Ibid.* 205.

[66] *Ibid.* 205-207.

[67] *Ibid.* 225.

[68] Kaldor, *op.cit.*

[69] Mary Kaldor, “Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars, and the War on Terror” (paper presented at the Cold War Studies Centre, London School of Economics, 2.2.2005).

[70] *Ibid.*, 9-10.

[71] R. Smith, *op.cit.*

[72] *Ibid.* 1.

[73] *Ibid.*

[74] The definition of policy and politics is roughly based on Peter Knoepfel et al., *Analyse et pilotage des politiques publiques* (Genève et Bâle: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 2001) 27.

[75] R. Smith, *op.cit.* 267.

[76] *Ibid.* 270-271.

[77] John Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, (London: Viking, 1988).

[78] Luttwak, *Warfare; Policy*.

[79] Münkler, *op.cit.* 310-354. This section bases primarily on Münkler’s analysis.

[80] Luttwak, *Policy* 42.

[81] Nigel Aylwin-Foster, “Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations” *Military Review* LXXXV, no. 06. (November-December 2005) 6.

[82] Münkler, *op.cit.* 310-354.

[83] Appendix 1 represents a summary of both the main attributes and the explanation of conflicts given by the framework presented earlier, sorted by author. A comprehensive discussion of the end of interstate war can be found in Raimo Väyrynen, ed., *The Waning of Major War - Theories and Debates* (London and New-York: Routledge, 2006).



Argument	Justification	Author
<i>Chaos generation and expansion in the pre-modern world</i>	Globalisation weakens authoritarian states; leads to identity politics, weakening the social fabrics and the state authority.  The states monopoly on the legitimate violence has faded; the convergence of transnational struggles, organized criminality and violations of human rights initiates a substantial chaos. Those conflicts waged by local actors such as army units, criminals, warlords, or gangs, take place within the population. Modern conflicts have become an instrument of politics rather than of policies.	Kaldor.  Cooper; van Creveld; Kaldor; Smith
<i>Waning of interstate, industrial war</i>	As domestic norms have changed (illegitimacy of war, war is not recognized as a tolerable instrument of policy), and democratic states and institutions have developed, interstate war is not an option for post-modern states; major wars are not legitimate anymore.	Cooper; van Creveld; Kaldor; Smith
<i>Decline of the exercise of military power</i>	The risks of interstate, industrial war within the modern world and between the modern and post-modern worlds have been reduced (1) because of the abundance of nuclear arms and the destructiveness of modern weapons, and (2) the linkage in trade due to globalisation that limits the probability of conflict. <sup>[84]</sup>	Cooper; van Creveld; Kaldor; Smith
<i>Spill-over of chaos</i>	Conflicts may spill-over in neighbouring, pre-modern or modern states, eventually – in limited form – in the post-modern world. Spill-over and problem because of global actors, trade, travel and diasporas.  This spill-over is facilitated by globalisation. The instruments of globalisation, particularly information and communication technology, as well as transportation means, can be used as weapon for asymmetric strategies.	Cooper; van Creveld; Kaldor; Smith
<i>Order enforcement by modern and post-modern</i>	To contain the chaos in parts of the pre-modern world, modern and post-modern states may intervene to enforce order or preclude spill-over.	Cooper; van Creveld; Kaldor; Smith
<i>Post-heroic context in the post-modern world</i>	The declining demography and changes in values have led to a lower tolerance toward casualties in post-modern societies. Therefore, a technological advantage is required to replace the clashes on the ground through precise, remote effects.	Luttwak

[4]

From	Pre-Modern	Modern	Post-Modern
<b>Against</b>			
<b>Pre-Modern</b>	(1) Chaos generation and expansion		(3) Enforcement of order <i>Post heroic context</i>
<b>Modern</b>		(4) Decline of the exercise of military power	(5) Waning of interstate wars <i>Post heroic context</i>
<b>Post-Modern</b>	(2) Chaos spill-over		

[5]



### Discussion

Succinctly, this chapter has shown that, according to the canonical authors on modern conflicts, two different trends can be observed:

- Classical, symmetrical warfare is disappearing, to be replaced by non-normed, asymmetric conflicts.
- Modern conflicts oppose failing states or non-state actors between themselves or against (post-)modern states.
- There is a need to update classical theories of war in order to take the characteristics of modern conflicts in account.

Integrating the characteristics of modern conflicts and Cooper's triad, tables 5 and 6 represent the locus of conflicts and their characteristics.

Hence, this framework allows examining the linkages between modern conflicts and asymmetric strategies in the following chapter.

### 3. Asymmetry strategies in modern conflicts

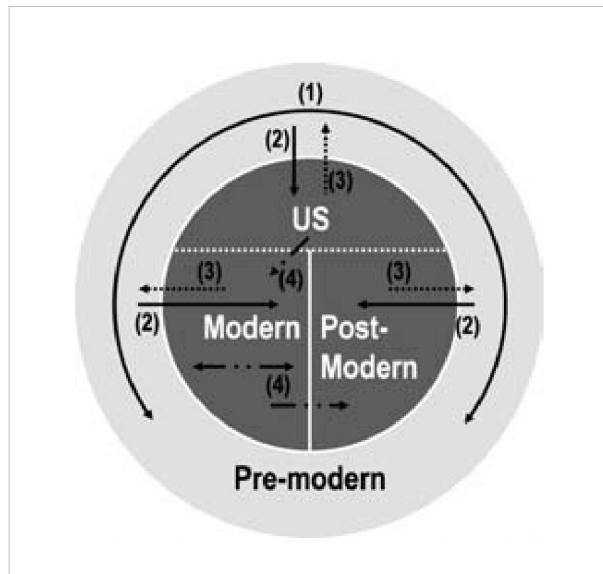
This chapter presents the tenets of modern conflicts under the perspective of asymmetric strategies. The first section of this chapter claims that modern conflicts and asymmetric strategies share a similar foundation. The second shows that the Western strategies are asymmetric (from strength). Thus, they compel the weaker side to use asymmetric strategies (from weakness) as an answer. The third demonstrate why asymmetric strategies from weakness give an edge to the weaker actors. Finally, the last section asserts the need to use the concept of asymmetric strategies to analyse modern conflicts.

#### Links between asymmetric strategies and modern conflicts

This section presents the association between chapter 1 and chapter 2 by showing that modern conflicts and asymmetry share a common basis: (1) globalisation, as a clash of norms and as a medium to create effects, can contribute to explain the origin of modern conflicts (2) modern peace (absence of conflicts: *waning of interstate wars, decline of the exercise of military power*) can be explained by symmetrisation, and (3) modern conflicts (*Chaos generation and expansion, spillover and enforcement of order*) as a re-asymmetrisation of warfare.

#### Globalisation and modern conflicts

Kaldor's description of the origin of modern conflicts is the most developed explanation within our selection of authors. She links modern conflicts to globalisation, as the liberal rules it is founded upon clashes with local norms. As a consequence, pre-modern world's failed, weaker or authoritarian states erode, whereas the emergence of identity politics leads to violence against the people. Clearly, the pre-modern world can be described as a space without common or shared norms and regulations (the "rule of law", for instance is not applied). Yet, the modern and post-modern worlds are defined by their application of norms (from ethical to industrial). Therefore, to paraphrase Münkler's previous discussion of norms in symmetry and asymmetry, the pre-modern world is a place "that can neither be commonly normed nor regulated", whereas the modern and post-modern worlds can "can be politically and legally regulated". Therefore, under the perspective of norms, symmetrical and asymmetri-



[6]

[84] It must fairly be said that trade did not impede World War I. But authors assert that globalisation and modern trade limits conflicts. See for instance Raimo Väyrynen, "Capitalism, War, and Peace - virtuous or vicious circles" in *The Waning of Modern War*.

[4] Characteristics of modern conflicts.

[5] Forms of contemporary conflicts.

[6] Diagram of contemporary conflicts.

cal strategies are a subset of political strategies challenged by globalisation.

### ... the pre-modern world can be described as a space without common or shared norms and regulations ...

The generation and the expansion of the pre-modern world's chaos are not restricted to the fringe anymore: Through globalisation, they are extended to the whole world and can cross borders. Moreover, actors from the pre-modern world can challenge the modern and post-modern worlds in two ways: First, as French sociologist Saïda Bédar asserts, globalisation is based on large-scale linkages through computer and communications technologies which lead to a global assimilation and world-wide reliance between units. Therefore, challengers can target the critical infrastructures, or use the instruments of globalisation, such as airplanes, to mount credible and efficient asymmetric strategies against the West.<sup>[85]</sup> Second, the globalisation's foundation, in terms of communication, can be used to broaden the particular identities over the Internet, or traditional media. It offers a channel for asymmetric information operations strategies that can broadcast a local message to a global audience.

These aspects can be extended to modern conflicts. In the first chapter, it has been shown why classical conflicts have been kept symmetrical, i.e. regulated. Political and moral issues have been mobilized to that effect. Applying those parameters to modern conflicts, the remnant of this section explains the symmetrisation of peace and re-asymmetrisation of warfare.

#### **Symmetrisation of peace**

Together with the limitation of the exercise of military power, the notion of the waning of major, interstate, wars is one of the tenets of the modern conflicts' framework. This sub-section presents an explanation of this thesis in terms of the regulation of conflicts within the post-modern and modern worlds.

#### *Political*

As Münkler stated, the regulation of conflicts has been in the interests of the states waging war. The nature of the post-modern world, itself based on political rules and the rise of multilateral, international organisations, implies that this control has been increasing, leading to situations where the prospect of war has disappeared. As Kalevi J. Holsti explains, "there is a strong correlation between the declining incidence of war and the spread of democratic institutions".<sup>[86]</sup> Political and economical regulations between the post-modern nations have led to similar political norms towards peace. Thus, the development of regulations to sustain peace and the change of political principles explain the waning of interstate wars.

#### *Moral*

The peace within the post-modern world is also generated by the development of common moral values between the states. As Cooper explains, "'the world's grown honest'. A large number of the most powerful states no longer want to

fight or to conquer".<sup>[87]</sup> What is more, the post-heroic nature of the western democracies leads them to restraint in the deployment and use of force. Therefore, new moral rules reinforce the tendency towards the waning of modern war.

#### **The re-asymmetrisation of warfare**

Using the same three parameters, this section explains the re-asymmetrisation of warfare as the decline of the necessity for rules in conflicts.

#### *Political*

New conflicts set the post-modern and modern worlds against weak states or non-states actors, which have no incentive to avoid chaos. Indeed, chaos creation can be understood as an asymmetric strategy that allows for their survival, especially as it lets them avoid detection. Therefore, the political rules used to regulate classical warfare are useless for the weaker actors. Thus, they have no further incentive to political symmetrisation.

#### *Moral*

Classical interstate conflicts were also symmetrical because of the warring parties' shared common principles, such as the respect for the law of war, based on Christian values. Yet, combatants from the pre-modern world do not necessarily share the same values. For instance, the Holy War, or Jihad, is unquestionably just for its followers because it has been enjoined by God,<sup>[88]</sup> not because it follows the *jus ad bellum* doctrine. Further, *jus in bello*'s edicts, such as discrimination and proportionality, based on the Enlightenment's image of man, hardly apply when the Other is dehumanised. Finally, the symmetrisation of warfare rests on the fact that "the end does not justify all means". In a conflict where one party fights for survival using a different ethical perspective, its incentives to restrict the conflict may be smaller than the necessity to win at all costs.<sup>[89]</sup>

As moral grounds for regulating conflicts disappear, asymmetrisation increases.

#### **Answers to western asymmetric strategies**

Whereas the political and moral influences on modern conflicts lead towards the use of asymmetric strategies, it is further argued in this section that the western way of war, being an asymmetric strategy itself, can only be opposed by another asymmetric strategy.

The traditional western way of warfare is based on technology, which allows for a spatially dissociation of the adversaries and leads the weaker side to a position of defencelessness against firepower, even increased by the stronger sides' 'commands the common'.<sup>[90]</sup> It has allowed the West to win every classical battle since Dien Bien Phu, and every conventional war effortlessly since the Korean War and tends to create a strong physical asymmetry. It makes use of the technological capacities of the West, and is strongly related to the concept of post-heroic warfare. One amongst many, General Fogleman has foreseen a "new American way of war" based on asymmetry:

*America has not only the opportunity but the obligation to transition from a concept of annihilation and attrition warfare that places thousands of young Americans at risk in brute, force-on-force*



conflicts to a concept that leverages our sophisticated military capabilities to achieve US objectives by applying what I like to refer to as an 'asymmetric force' strategy.<sup>[91]</sup>

The expected result of this approach has been somewhat optimistically described in an American white paper:

*The United States and its allies asymmetrically assault the adversary from directions and in dimensions against which he has no counter, dictating the terms and tempos of the operation. The adversary, suffering from the loss of coherence and unable to achieve his objectives, chooses to cease actions that are against US interests or has his capabilities defeated.*<sup>[92]</sup>

Yet, Professor Stephen Blank contests the arguments that opponents will be brought to surrender. To the contrary, he argues, *they will seek strategies designed to negate the technological and organizational competency of U.S. air and space forces. In other words, because America possesses inherently asymmetrical capabilities vis-à-vis almost everyone else, they will be driven to pursue asymmetrical strategies against it that negate those advantages.*<sup>[93]</sup>

So, as Admiral Arthur Cebrowski and Professor Thomas Barnett emphasize, *the rise of asymmetrical warfare is largely our own creation. We are creating the mismatch in means as we increasingly extend the reach of our warfighting machine down the range of conflict – past the peer competitor, past the rogue nation-state, right down to individual enemy combatants.*<sup>[94]</sup>

Therefore the advantages of the physical, asymmetric, strategies of the West produce structurally unintended consequences that expand the asymmetrisation of warfare. Moreover, if the West fights asymmetrically against everyone else, its enemies' strategies will also be conversely inherently asymmetric!<sup>[95]</sup>

Nonetheless, Richard Shultz and Andrea Dew assert that the modern conflicts are an epiphenomenon of age-old warfare, lead within a tribal, clan and ethnic framework: "for warriors, traditional concepts of war remain highly relevant. What is more, these traditional concepts will invariably take protracted, irregular, and unconventional forms of combat 'on the ground'".<sup>[96]</sup> Still, insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq have a fast learning curve.<sup>[97]</sup> They are known to study western military doctrines.<sup>[98]</sup> Finally, terrorist attacks such as 9/11 or 7/7 did not confront directly the western military power. They were based on ontological imbalance. Clearly, asymmetry in modern conflicts arises partially as a reaction to the western way of war.

### Answers to pre-modern asymmetric strategies

On the other side, in order to win, pre-modern world's actors challenging the West have to pursue asymmetric strategies from the weaker. As they generally fight a conflict of survival, they use physical (for instance, in terms of dispersion), conceptual (i.e. in negating principles of wars such as concentration of forces) or willpower-based (in protracting the conflict and targeting the population's support) asymmetric strategies in order to negate the western military power.<sup>[99]</sup> However, ontological asymmetries offer even more success: Blank

[85] Saïda Bédar, "La Révolution dans les affaires militaires et la 'course aux capacités'" *Forum du désarmement*, no. 4 (2001): 31-32.

[86] Kalevi J. Holsti, "The Decline of Interstate War" in *The Waning of Modern War*.

[87] Cooper, *op.cit.* 32.

[88] Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations* (London: Penguin Books, 1998) 289.

[89] van Creveld, *op.cit.* 145.

[90] Münkler, *op.cit.* 65.

[91] Fogleman, quoted in Correll, "Casualties" 49.

[92] J9 Joint Futures lab, "Rapid Decisive Operations (RDO) White Paper Coordinating Draft (Version 2.0)" (United States Joint Forces Command, 2001), Note 1, ii. quoted in Antulio J. Echevarria, "Rapid decisive operations: US operational assumptions regarding future warfare" *Defence Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 128.

[93] Blank, *op.cit.* 350.

[94] Arthur K. Cebrowski and Thomas P.M. Barnett, "The American Way of War" *Proceedings [U.S. Naval Institute]* (January 2003).

[95] Blank, *op.cit.* 350.

[96] Shultz and Dew, *op.cit.* 269-270.

[97] See, for instance, Peter Eisler, "Insurgents adapting faster to U.S. defenses" *USA Today* Jul 16, 2007.

[98] William S.Lind, "Understanding Fourth Generation War" *Military Review* LXXXIV, no. 5 (2004, September- October): 12.

[99] Münkler, *op.cit.* 66.



argues forcefully that the US strategies betray *an unsettling strategic ethnocentrism, an increasingly articulated belief that [the US] alone have the answers*. (...) *Arguably as well such thinking and monistic, mechanistic, stereotypical responses to the world of military conflict are auguries of disaster or at least of unnecessary suffering.*<sup>[100]</sup>

Yet, as Professor Christopher Bellamy recalls, “turning the adversary’s advantages against them—as Al Qa’ida (it is assumed) did with horrific brilliance on 11 September is a hallmark of [ontological] asymmetric [strategies].”<sup>[101]</sup>

In parallel, the more adversaries use asymmetric strategies, the more the West has to develop its own asymmetric strategies. Thus, for Münkler, however old the notions of asymmetry in warfare, contemporary conflicts have taken a new form due to the nature of Western societies: their hegemonic power, as well as “post-heroic” nature, makes them prone to asymmetry from weakness. Therefore, they must develop asymmetric strategies (from strength), based on technology, to avoid being drawn to a heroic type of fight.<sup>[102]</sup> However, as Blanks remarks convincingly, “since enemies are inherently asymmetric, extremely so in the case of an enemy like Al-Qaida, they present not just inherent asymmetries of strategies, operations, and tactics, but also present immense cognitive barriers to understanding which no technology can fully erase”.<sup>[103]</sup> If one takes the U.S. as a benchmark, the difficulty to adapt, so much the classical warfighting is embroiled in the fabrics of the military.<sup>[104]</sup>

**... contemporary conflicts have taken a new form due to the nature of Western societies: their hegemonic power, as well as “post-heroic” nature, makes them prone to asymmetry from weakness.**

A possible explanation of the difficulty of this ontological transformation lies in the fact that the key to success in the conventional wars lies in “always more” (material, resources ...), whereas success in an asymmetric setting lies in a faster adaptation to the adversary, so the Iraqi insurgents, for instance, have a much faster adaptation cycle. The same pattern has been shown in the conflict between Israel and the Hezbollah in 2006. As Lambakis et al acknowledged, *labeling threats as asymmetric (...) implicitly concedes the fact that we are either not prepared for some very real contingencies, either in terms of operational planning, or intelligence, and information dominance, or that we adapt slowly and poorly to changing operational realities (...)*.<sup>[105]</sup>

#### **Need for a reconceptualization of warfare**

The last sections have shown that, in fighting modern conflicts, the western way of warfare (1) compels the adversary to use asymmetric strategies and (2) the western military has difficulties in changing its conventional way of warfare to adapt to modern conflicts and the use of asymmetries. As adversaries use ontological asymmetries, they not only target western social restraints’ patterns against violence,<sup>[106]</sup> but

additionally, “turn the Western conceptualization of war – its orientation pattern – against itself”.<sup>[107]</sup>

**... the western military has difficulties in changing its conventional way of warfare to adapt to modern conflicts and the use of asymmetries.**

As a consequence, there is a need to reframe the current western strategic theory of conflict, in order to explain the share of reality that is currently unaccounted for. Blank insists that:

*Undertaking such a reconceptualization is urgent because it is clear that it is precisely here, in the realm of thinking about strategy and how to achieve our strategic goals, and about the enemy that we have fallen short and continue to do so.*<sup>[108]</sup>

Developing this concept within the frame of this essay would be preposterous. Therefore, we will only present a few themes that should be addressed in this process.

Reframing the western strategic theory should then address the following issues:

- War’s changing context, whereas the use of force is not the instrument to gain victory with a decisive battle any longer, but an instrument of power among others that should enforce order in order to give policy a chance.
- The fact that the western asymmetry of strength leads the contending actors towards further asymmetric strategies.
- Understanding that the enemy may fight using other ontology and finding strategies that deal with it.<sup>[109]</sup>
- Use our ontological limitations, such as the respect for the law of war, as a grand strategic opportunity within an approach that emphasises the attractive aspects of this restraint within a soft power approach.

**The fact that the western asymmetry of strength leads the contending actors towards further asymmetric strategies.**

In summary, a reframing of current strategic theories to take asymmetric strategies and the essentials of modern conflicts is of utmost importance.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Framed in the post Cold War context, this essay has provided a broad outlook over asymmetry, modern conflicts and their relationship. It does not pretend to have exhausted the subject. Rather, it has reviewed the concept of asymmetry, various frameworks of modern conflicts and shown their linkages and mutual influences, leading to the following positions:

1. Under the perspective of globalisation leading to a clash of rules in the pre-modern world, modern conflicts and asymmetry are converging theories. In this respect, the waning of war can be understood as the creation of peace through symmetrisation of political, moral and institutional rules,

whereas modern conflicts are defined by the disconnection of those rules.

2. The western way of warfare, based on technology and overwhelming power, cannot be matched symmetrically by its adversaries. They have therefore to apply asymmetric strategies. Hence, asymmetry is partially a western creation. On the other hand, the West has difficulties in adjusting its strategic theories, still based on WWII models, to the current situation.
3. There is hence a need to re-conceptualise the western strategic theories and to adjust them to modern conflicts and the consequences of asymmetric strategies.

Therefore, asymmetry allows for a better understanding of modern conflicts: they entail a disappearance of norms, whereas asymmetry follows from it. On the other side, the disappearance of industrial war is partially caused by the development of common, multilateral political, moral and institutional rules. Asymmetric strategies also allow a better understanding of the adversary, which is first compelled to surrender or to use asymmetric strategies by the western asymmetric superiority. For the West, asymmetric strategies demonstrate the dilemma of contemporary strategic theories: Faced by methods that negate its technology, the West can not enter a heroic fight and must therefore further develop its technology, a vicious circle that opens gaps for schemes based on ontological asymmetry.

### ... asymmetric strategies demonstrate the dilemma of contemporary strategic theories ...

Which answer could be brought to this dilemma? First, as proposed in an unofficial field manual on 'Fourth Generation of War', one could envision a re-symmetrisation of the fight around a "chivalric code".<sup>[110]</sup> However, this strategy requires the West to partly relinquish its strengths, its adversaries to accept western norms and all of them to discuss warfare norms. To put it mildly, this course of action appears to be exceedingly difficult to implement in practice. Second, the western actors could go asymmetric and loosen their own norms, relaxing for instance their rules of engagement or their laws of war. Yet, this option challenges the core principles of the post-modern world. The military and the West would not only lose their souls and their moral ground, but also their attraction potential: the prisoners' abuse in Abu Ghraib undermined the U.S. pledge that the Iraq war had been led to promote democracy and human rights. An official and broader use of unrestricted violence would therefore be extremely counterproductive. There seems to be no response in pure military terms.

Therefore, a point can be made for a broader analysis of asymmetric strategies. This study was restricted to military power. Yet, the role of the other instruments of power can not be dismissed. There appears to be a need to study an all-of-government, comprehensive approach to asymmetry, including the role of soft power: Through policies and norms, the post-modern world delivers order and provides security, stability and prosperity, as well as conflict settlement procedures that do not rely on violence. Could these grand strate-

gic rules have an influence on conflict settlement? It would be presumptuous to offer a definitive solution to this quandary. Still, it is worthy to observe that, thirty years after having defeated America in a foremost asymmetric war, Vietnam has embraced capitalism.<sup>[111]</sup>

### There appears to be a need to study an all-of-government, comprehensive approach to asymmetry, including the role of soft power.

Hence the need for a reevaluation of current military-focused strategic theories: failure to recognize the changing shades of a chameleon-like war and its broader context is a recipe to strategic defeat.

[100] Blank, *op.cit.* 353.

[101] Christopher Bellamy, "'Tools of Ill-Omen': The Shifted Conflict Paradigm and Reduced Role of Conventional Military Power" *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15, no. 1 (April 2002): 152.

[102] Münkler, *op.cit.* 288.

[103] Blank, *op.cit.* 357.

[104] Aylwin-Foster, *op.cit.* Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?*, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) monographs (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006).

[105] Lambakis et al., *op.cit.* 269.

[106] See, for instance, Peters, *op.cit.*

[107] Frans P. B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (London: Routledge, 2007) 253.

[108] Blank, *op.cit.* 362.

[109] Vincent Desportes, "Combats de demain: le futur est-il prévisible?" *Doctrine*, no. 11 (Mars 2006): 8.

[110] FMFM 1-A, *op.cit.* 29.

[111] See, for instance, "America lost, capitalism won" *The Economist* (28.04.2005).