
Asymmetric Warfare: A Strategy of Choice

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The term asymmetric 'war' or warfare has now been in use for some time. Being of Western origin, even in the Indian Army it is used more or less in the same sense as in the West, particularly the US. As such, generally, in India, it has come to be understood as unconventional warfare or the type of conflict indulged in by terrorists and insurgents where there is vast asymmetry, mainly in force levels, in terms of both manpower and firepower, and following from it, in tactics and methods.

This article proposes that while this may be largely true in a practical sense as is being seen around the globe, it is possible for even normal conventional forces to decide to engage in asymmetrical warfare (AsW) as a *strategy of choice*. All that is required is rigorous training and suitable equipment to operate and fight in an environment of 'deprivation.' By the same token, two countries fighting conventional wars can also be 'asymmetric' as illustrated by the war between the US led coalition and Iraq where, besides other things, there was asymmetry in the availability of, and ability to use, technology. This article explores this idea further and proposes how a medium to advanced military power can deliberately and profitably employ this strategy against a similar or even superior military.

AsW is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it is the next logical step in the continuum of the evolution of warfare. World War II saw the emergence of the strategy of manoeuvre where the opponent's front, flanks and rear were attacked simultaneously. This strategy itself was evolved from the frontal attacks supported by the massed fires, artillery and machine gun of World War I. AsW carries this strategy of manoeuvre a step further by not touching the front or the flanks but

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concentrating solely on the rear areas and soft targets there. Ideally, it would avoid meeting the opponent's combat soldiers altogether and civilians and other value assets. The aim is to destroy not soldiers but the national will to fight.

AsW is characterised by the firepower employed by the adversaries. On the one hand, there are masses and sophistication of fires of the conventional forces while, on the other, there are very crude and, sometimes even primitive, weapons. Although one reads regularly of technological developments, which make it possible to bring to bear much more superior, accurate and potentially lethal firepower with decreasing logistics load and expenses, a note of caution must be sounded. The fact is that even in the most technologically advanced countries, many of these developments are still on the drawing boards and in the glossies. It takes a very long time for drawing board technology to actually convert into weapons which are fully tried and tested and in whose effectiveness and utility, the troops have confidence. Nevertheless, it is quite likely that the 'weaker', (physical force level-wise) side may substantially make up for this by weapon systems and equipment which are lighter in terms of weight, heavier in terms of firepower and more effective in terms of lethality.

Dependence on, or rather independence from, regular logistics is another important issue. A fighter of AsW will have to be *trained* to live with minimum or no regular logistic support, with greater dependence on local and enemy resources. It is this ability of these troops to be able to operate with their logistics 'on their back,' which allows them far greater freedom of movement to run circles around conventional troops who are hamstrung because of their inability to operate effectively without long tails of various logistic echelons behind them.

Along with this logistics freedom goes the mental attitude and training to take initiative and act in the absence of orders. Without these, the freedom of movement would be wasted. Even amongst conventional forces, it is common, sometimes amounting to a 'cliche', to talk about mental mobility and directional style of command. But quite often these phrases remain just that – phrases used in training. Mental mobility is not easy to come by. Long and deliberate training is required not only of the soldiers but also of the commanders. The two must train together so that the latter develop that degree of confidence in their troops that it is sufficient to tell them just the end objective and leave to them the manner of achieving it. Very few armies actually follow this principal as an article of faith.

Psychological offensive forms a deliberate and important part of AsW. An AsW fighter creates an aura of invincibility about him, projecting himself as a bogeyman, who can appear any time from anywhere, conduct a lightning strike

and disappear into thin air. For this effect, he makes good use of the local media. The best way to counter it would be for the media to totally ignore the AsW fighter and his activities, and mutually agree not to report them at all. However, in a democracy, particularly with the free and open print and visual media, this can only be a dream. It must be appreciated that no media venture is in the business for charity and one-up-manship and scoring points over competitors is part of the business. For this, they try – and, in most cases, succeed – to undermine the very same liberties that the civil societies enjoy and which the former are against.

A very important, almost vital, factor, which is not sufficiently appreciated, is the environment of the two. AsW fighters are characterised by extreme informality of organisation, dress, hierarchy, in fact, total life-style. This is in contrast to the extreme formality of a ‘good’ conventional army. As a result, the actions of a conventional army are extremely predictable. They are trained to fight in a set manner and follow, sometimes to the letter, set drills. As such, they easily get confused when the opponent, an AsW fighter, does not conform to the *standard drills*. *There is, thus, a fundamental ‘cultural differences’* between the two.

I had an opportunity to see this first hand. In 1987, when I was an instructor at the DSSC, one evening I got a frantic call from Madras (now Chennai) that the army commander, a colonel of my former regiment, wanted to meet me the following morning. Catching an early morning flight from Coimbatore, I reached Madras and met the army commander. He briefed me to the effect that I should go to Sri Lanka and interview non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and young officers (YOs), to learn and write about their versions of actions, since he suspected that many of the after action reports were doctored. He wanted to publish the accounts gathered by me as a training publication to highlight the fact that in battle, fear was natural – however, one could learn to overcome it.

One of my interviews was with an NCO from a traditional warrior class from western India. The unit had recently suffered very heavy casualties and their morale was pretty low. When I asked him what had happened, his reply was full of frustration. He said, “*Saab, hum bahut bahadur hain, lekin dushman*

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dikhe to ham apni bahaduri dikhaen" (Sir, we are very brave, but we can show our bravery only if the enemy shows himself). He explained that during training, they had been taught that in an attack, one formed up in a straight line in a pre-marked place called the FUP, there would be a preliminary fire by artillery to soften the objective, and then on a given signal or a given time, the whole line would move up, and short of the objective, they would fix bayonets and charge, shouting the battle cry of the *paltan*. However, here was a situation which did not match their training in any way. There was no well-defined 'objective,' no preliminary fires, no FUP and not even an enemy who would fire at you like a 'man!' In fact, there would be either a sneak round fired from nowhere and one man would die. Or else, there would be a long burst of fire and a few men would become casualties. By the time the battalion or the company would stand to wait for the attack to come, the 'enemy' would have melted away. It was a classic example of AsW and a battle of nerves where a numerically stronger, better equipped and trained (conventionally) force was defeated, not militarily but psychologically, by the comparatively ill-equipped and not so deliberately trained teenagers.

Another case was of a young rifleman from an old Gorkha battalion with excellent traditions, composed of troops from eastern Nepal. He narrated how he was manning a light machine gun (LMG) as a part of an ambush. Well camouflaged in thick bushes, he was lying motionless and in wait for almost three hours, with nobody approaching. His section commander was about to give up and lift the ambush and withdraw. Just then, he heard some voices and soon saw a group of some 12 girls walking down the trail. They had not seen the ambush and he waited for them to come closer. Although he had been briefed that in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) they had female recruits also, this was the first time he had seen some, and was not sure if these particular girls were separatists or ordinary village girls going to their school. More than that, he was worried that if he opened fire on women, the battalion would lose face and its '*izzat*.' When they were almost in front of him, about a dozen yards away, he noticed some of the girls trailing Kalashnikovs, a trademark weapon of the LTTE. When he noticed the weapons, he just aimed in the centre of the group and pressed the trigger, almost emptying the magazine and killing the whole lot of them.

These two narratives clearly demonstrate the classical psychology of well trained soldiers of old armies with equally venerable traditions. In the first case, the soldier was totally confused because the action did not go according to his expectations and the opponent did not conform to the 'form.' His problem was

that the enemy did not *'play according to rules,'* and that, therefore, the fight was 'unfair.' Subsequently, I have heard many officers, senior and not so senior, complaining that the soldiers did not live up to the hype of their traditions. However, I think that while this may also have been so, the soldiers were not told what to expect and were not adequately *'re-trained.'* One has even heard people joking that the first batch that landed in Sri Lanka took their job as 'peace-keepers' so seriously that they were sporting white arm-bands like umpires in an exercise with troops! This is, of course an exaggeration and meant only to emphasise that the troops had gone inadequately prepared and that the leaders at all levels cannot escape their responsibility for the overall 'poor show.' The

second example also showed that although briefed, the soldier was not sure if the girls were the 'enemy' within the meaning of the act, and whether to open fire on women. He was concerned about the *paltan's* name and about what his folks at home would think when they learnt that he had used his weapon against women. In short, in both cases, the conventional army lost against a weaker militia force because they could not cope with the AsW launched by the other side.

So what is the solution? Is a conventional army, however well trained and equipped, doomed to fail when faced with a force employing AsW techniques, whether they belong to a militia, terrorist organisation or other non-state actor? The answer is obviously a clear NO. There is an adage as old as warfare itself, which says, "to catch a thief, set a thief." In a presentation at the CLAWS Seminar held in Delhi in November 2004 and in the paper published in a book on the subject of "Special Forces," this author had stated that "...if the opponent is fighting an unconventional war with no agreed principals and code of conduct, and with complete disregard for basic human values..."¹ we are also perfectly justified in fighting in a similar manner. It is obvious that one cannot have all of the regular army of a country trained and equipped only for such unconventional tasks. The answer perhaps lies in adequate numbers of regular troops trained, equipped and organised as special forces (SF). As suggested in the above cited article, SF are best suited to fight an unconventional war, which includes AsW. For best results, ideally this should be an inter-Service

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organisation. Each country will have to decide on the size of the force and the proportion of each Service in it. This will include many factors such as the country's geo-political ambitions and threats, the overall size of the armed forces, the state of the economy and how much it can afford to spend (SF are extremely expensive to raise, equip and sustain, and one cannot have them just because of a 'me too' syndrome).

A bogey of sorts is being created about AsW and unconventional wars. More so, in the Western literature where most armies are modern, with great reliance on advanced technologies, and have adopted and evolved new tactics to absorb these technologies. In the process, they seem to have forgotten the good old childhood game of 'cops and robbers.' A dispassionate analysis shows that there is no change in basic tactics; only the form has changed. The Third World countries, with relatively unsophisticated, but still modern, armies, are less likely to be taken by total surprise when faced with AsW. A little imagination and expense are needed to meet an AsW fighter on his own terms and defeat him.