

## **Nukes or IEDS?**

An examination of asymmetrical vs symmetrical warfare and which method of conflict poses the greatest risk.

by

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# NUKES OR IEDS?

## **Abstract:**

*The conflict in Ukraine promises to not be the last symmetrical conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as US defense strategy shifts towards potential conflicts with near-peer threats such as China and Russia. However, as recent acts of aggression by the Houthis in Yemen and Iranian supported militia groups in Iraq show, the threat of asymmetrical warfare isn't going away. Which method of warfare presents the greatest challenges and dangers to the US? This paper examines the nature of symmetrical and asymmetrical warfare and determines which is the more dangerous form of warfare.*

## **Introduction**

Most of world history leading up to the latter end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by defined nation-states waging wars against other similar-sized nation-states or systems of alliances. Beginning with the Vietnam War, world history saw a shift towards smaller-scale conflicts waged by superpowers vs smaller nation-states or non-state actors such as terrorist organizations. However, with Russian saber-rattling towards NATO in Ukraine and China making geopolitical moves to challenge the US for hegemonic control over world trade with initiatives like the Belt and Road and their island building strategies in the Pacific, the traditional nature of conflict appears poised to make a return to the grand world stage. Is a shift towards traditional warfare over irregular warfare a good thing? What form of warfare poses the greatest threat? This paper will examine the differences between asymmetrical and symmetrical warfare to draw a conclusion about which form of warfare is the most dangerous.

A discussion of this nature must begin with a definition of terms. Catherine Theohary in her *Defense Primer* (2024) published by the Congressional Research Service defined symmetrical warfare as, "...a violent struggle for domination between nation-states ... traditional warfare typically involves force-on-force military operations in which adversaries employ a variety of conventional forces and special operations forces." Theohary (2024) defined asymmetrical warfare as, "a type of war between opposing forces that have divergent military power, strategy, or tactics. It often involves the use of unconventional weapons and tactics, such as those associated with guerrilla warfare and terrorism." Symmetrical warfare, also known as traditional or conventional warfare, involves the pitting of defined armies from nations of typically comparable strengths in declared states of war against each other whereas asymmetrical warfare, also known as irregular warfare, typically involves people's uprisings or the resistance of small countries or organizations against larger defined armies or nation-states. It is important to note however that small nations can engage in symmetrical warfare, but they usually will rely on the support of an alliance system for either arms or troops. The Korean War and the current war in Ukraine are prime examples of smaller nations waging war against a larger nation via conventional tactics but propped up by the support of a larger nation or system of alliances. A conflict that involves a larger nation vs a smaller nation does not automatically make the conflict asymmetrical.

## **Potential vs Reality**

Before one can assess the dangers of asymmetrical vs symmetrical warfare one must first understand what the most likely form that warfare will take. At first glance, conventional warfare clearly poses the greatest physical risk. This form of warfare not only brings the most combined firepower to play but also has the possibility of nuclear holocaust depending on the nations involved. Surely this should end the discussion here and now. However, in considering which form of warfare is the most dangerous, one has to examine what the most likely form of that warfare is, as a threat that is unlikely to be used is not truly dangerous. With the rapid proliferation of nuclear capabilities post WWII and the advent of mutually assured destruction (Historical Office, 2024) nuclear weapons became nearly obsolete as they were considered a weapon of absolute last resort. Despite 9 nations having nuclear capabilities, over 10,000 warheads amassed between them (Roser, Herre, and Hasell, 2013), and all having been involved in regional or global confrontations (often against each other), not one weapon of mass destruction (WMD) has ever been deployed in a military action since WWII. The world has seen multiple conventional wars since the advent of WMDs, including the current war waging in Ukraine, but they have all been artificially constrained as neither side has brought their full military capacity to bear on the other for fear of pushing that nation or its allies into triggering the ever feared nuclear response. For the purpose of further demonstrating this concept consider air travel. The inherent physical risks of air travel may seem to make it a more dangerous option when compared to driving as the worst-case scenario of a crash in the air far outstrips the worst-case scenario of a crash on the ground both in numbers of fatalities and likelihood of fatality resulting from the accident. However, data from the Bureau of Transportation demonstrates that the danger of driving is actually far higher than flying with over 40,000 highway deaths recorded in 2021 while deaths due to air travel were close to 0. In assessing the danger of a potential threat, the most probable course of action must be considered and weighed against the theoretically possible but highly improbable.

Instead of the single-minded goals of nuclear conflict bent only on the complete destruction of the opposing force, modern symmetrical warfare tends to be limited in scope. In most cases, the sovereignty of the opposing state is never even in question. Rather, modern symmetrical conflicts are waged for clearly defined and limited war goals. The fear being that if the goals are too extreme the international community, and specifically the US may feel the need to intervene. The dangers of overcommitting to too broad a war aim have been clearly demonstrated in the Ukraine conflict. The world sat by and did nothing when Putin annexed Crimea in 2014 (Pifer, 2020), however when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and threatened its sovereignty the international community reacted with economic sanctions and military support for Ukraine (Garamone, 2022), thwarting Russia's war goals, at least for the time being.

However, when it comes to asymmetrical warfare there is no artificial restraint, at least on the side of the smaller force. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide vests, chemical attacks, hijacking, and even the potential of small-yield nuclear strikes are all on the table for the conductors of asymmetrical warfare. Not only is the potential threat of asymmetrical warfare great but the most likely course of action matches the potential threat. Small state actors are already working from a place of desperation and last resort so their threshold for what actions they will consider is far lower than what the opposing conventional force will do to counter them. When non-state actors (like terrorist organizations) come into play, the situation degrades further as the political ramifications of nationhood disappear entirely and the non-state actor is

able to act with near impunity. Traditional thinking on warfare echoed Clausewitz (1989, p.214) who stated that “armies do not burst from one theater of war into another,” but with asymmetrical warfare not only can threats appear rapidly without warning across multiple theaters but they then can disappear just as rapidly giving the lumbering superpower the appearance of swatting at flies.

### **The Nature of the Opponent**

The biggest difference between symmetrical and asymmetrical warfare is the nature of the opponent. In symmetrical warfare, the opponent is most likely to be a clearly defined and globally recognized nation-state, with an army comprised of recruits and potentially draftees. Nation-states will have clearly defined war goals because wars must be justified to the civilian populace in some form, regardless of the government structure of the country in question. Nation-states have clearly defined positions of importance that the mechanisms of governance rely on that become vulnerabilities that can be exploited such as cities, energy plants, and military fortifications. Nation-states also must juggle the financial responsibilities of nationhood along with the financial costs of warfare. Nation-states also rely economically and politically on the international community and must consider the reactions of the international community when weighing the costs of their war goals which, as previously stated, may limit their ultimate war objectives.

None of these characteristics entangle the opponents typically faced in asymmetric warfare, especially the asymmetrical conflicts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most opponents in asymmetric conflicts are non-government organizations (NGOs), terrorist groups, or militias formed from people’s uprisings. Not only are there rarely clearly defined vulnerabilities due to the underground and decentralized nature of most terrorist networks, but the line between combatants and non-combatants is frequently blurred. Though it is certainly important for terrorist and guerilla organizations to draw support from the community (Tse-Tung, 2015, p.43) terrorist organizations are not burdened by the weight of governmental responsibilities or managing civilian populaces. All resources can be committed to warfare and when a leader dies, he is typically easily replaced due to the decentralized nature of the system. The biggest difference between asymmetrical and symmetrical conflicts is time. Nation-states cannot wage war indefinitely as the cost of war will overwhelm the costs and responsibilities of nationhood. Terrorist organizations can wage war nearly indefinitely.

### **Which Form of Warfare is the Most Dangerous?**

In symmetrical warfare, your military may be defeated on the field of battle, but they are unlikely to be beaten in whole as nation-states are unlikely to commit their full forces to a fight fearing to trigger a nuclear response and reserves can rest comfortably within their borders knowing the enemy dares not pursue the offensive too far for the same fears that belay the presentation of total force. Territory may be taken, and victories won but primarily they will be over extended areas of influence in protracted wars separate from the actual territory of the nations at play (such as the Korean War). In the very worst-case scenario, these conflicts may take place on the outer edges of a nation’s territorial reach, but the main body of the nuclear-equipped nation is likely safe from aggression, such as in the current war in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To help assuage fears of escalation with Russia, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated after receiving new arms shipments from the US that it would not attack Russian territory itself. Article by *The Wall*

Symmetrical conflicts may carry greater stakes but at least they are clearly defined and the extent of the conflict will be limited by the international system and the shadow of nuclear response.

In asymmetric warfare, the aims are usually murky and rely often on ideological vs political components which make them difficult to oppose militarily. Furthermore, asymmetrical warfare not only has no restraints but typically no clearly defined battle fronts due to a tactic best summed up by Mao Tse-Tung (2015, p.44), “we must strike the weak spots in the enemy’s flanks, in his front, in his rear. We must make war everywhere and cause dispersal of his forces and dissipation of his strength.” With the advent of international terrorism, this tactic spreads beyond the battlefield and brings the threat of war back to the very territorial centers of warring nations. With no defined battlefield and threats from all sides, the strategic value of superiority of numbers so prized by Clausewitz is neutralized and the conventional state becomes reactive vs proactive in dealing with the guerilla or terrorist network. Asymmetrical warfare, while avoiding the massive instant casualties from full-pitched symmetrical battles, can still have a significant impact on military losses long term as the opponent is drawn into lengthy grueling conflicts with gradual losses over time and no clear end game which has a highly demoralizing effect on the occupying force. Clausewitz (1989, p.189) stated that an army needed, “...a series of victorious wars,” to create strong military virtues but clear-cut victories are elusive in this form of conflict and short-lived as the enemy rallies to attack on another front as soon as one fight is over. Over time, the larger force can become battle-weary and exhausted,<sup>2</sup> which is even more detrimental than its actual military losses.

### Conclusion

Most modern symmetrical conflicts will end in standoffs, but asymmetrical conflicts carry with them the real possibility of defeat and since they tend to be elongated in nature the loss is felt all the more deeply and the societal and political repercussions can shake a nation’s very confidence in itself. Wars are waged by nation-states for political purposes (Clausewitz, 1989, p.85) and thus the political impact should be primarily used to determine the danger of a mode of warfare. A country going to war knows there are going to be losses, that is the nature of conflict, but they consider the costs to be worth the end goal of the engagement. However, if that engagement ends in defeat, and worse, if that conflict should last for a decade or more, embroiling many generations and creating a heavy weight on the political, cultural, and economic centers of the nation, not only are the costs now meaningless but the damage from the defeat can have compounding effects. The Department of Veteran Affairs (2023) lists twelve wars that America has been involved in. Only three of the twelve wars could be categorized as asymmetrical conflicts. These three conflicts are the Indian Wars, the Vietnam War, and The Global War on Terror and are the only US wars to last longer than ten years. The two asymmetrical conflicts that took place outside the US are the only two US wars that ended with the enemy in possession of the main field of contention: Vietnam and Afghanistan. America is 0/2 in asymmetrical wars in the modern era and that is a very scary statement. The history of the US proves that asymmetrical warfare is the most dangerous.

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*Street Journal*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-zelensky-rejects-trading-land-for-peace-with-russia-11654072526>.

<sup>2</sup> A key element to using guerrilla warfare effectively according to Nguyen Giap was to exhaust the larger force, “little by little with small victories.” Quote from Lawrence Freedman’s book *Strategy*, 2013, p. 187.

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