



Asymmetry: prospects and dangers.

military-Earth thinking notebook

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The two world conflicts that ravaged Europe and part of Asia during the "barbaric century" brought the Clausewitzian concept of total war to a climax. States, engaged in what are now described as symmetrical confrontations, mobilised all their forces, both military, economic, social, diplomatic and cultural.

However, the conflicts at the beginning of the 21st century are rather described by experts as asymmetrical [1]. 1) They are characterised by the discrepancy between the means, modes of action or objectives of each belligerent. Some even predict the inexorable generalization, even the primacy, of these types of conflict that history seems to be returning to since the disintegration of the Soviet empire closed the Cold War.

Anesthetized by nuclear deterrence, will the conflicts of the 21st century be inevitably asymmetrical?

1) This notion should not be confused with asymmetry, which reflects a marked imbalance in the level of the stakes or in the quantity and performance of the means, but little in the nature of these means, nor in the way of acting.

Perhaps the 21st century will no longer be one of total war. However, it will probably be characterised by its ambiguity: under the guise of asymmetrical confrontations, Western democracies will launch into wars they know they can win in order to preserve their values and interests at the lowest cost.

Forbidden by the nuclear fact, war seems inexorably to take on the face of asymmetry, a paradoxical characteristic that concomitantly meets the interests of the weak and the powerful. On the eve of the presidential elections, this attractive concept could however be misleading and dangerous for France.

Asymmetry seems to characterize the conflicts of this beginning of the 21st century. It thus masks the always dual nature of the confrontations which generally lead to a more or less developed and risky form of symmetry. Carried by different stakes and different logics, asymmetry seduces, paradoxically, both the weak and the strong.

Certain forms of symmetrical struggle are necessary because they are generally likely to preserve a situation of peace. Nuclear deterrence, in particular, and the "equalizing power of the atom" provide their holders with protection against any hint of external aggression. This is indeed the observation made by Iran in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, which no doubt explains its current nuclear policy. This desire is part of a strategy of means which requires the mobilisation, here again, of all the resources of a country, but with almost guaranteed results. Possession of such a weapon must nevertheless be accompanied by a doctrine which completes its credibility. The effort initiated by General De Gaulle led to the French deterrent force in 1964. The doctrines and technological improvements that have followed since then guarantee, even today, the meaning of the French deterrent. The effort made by the nation remains no less considerable.

Nevertheless, access to the nuclear club remains a rare privilege. The destructive power of Western societies, combined with their economic and industrial potential, therefore leads their adversaries towards circumvention strategies. Seeking to exploit the vulnerabilities of democracies, they are forced into asymmetry. From terrorism to the misuse of civilian means, from attacks to the manipulation of the media, from the liberating ideology of peoples to mafia-like excesses, the weak necessarily seek to take the confrontation to a favourable terrain where they can fight with hope of success. The example of Indochina, like that of the more current Taliban in Afghanistan, show, however, that the asymmetrical struggle must eventually open up to armed confrontation, which is increasingly symmetrical, in order to hope for victory. The asymmetry systematically sought by the weak is therefore only a default attitude that enables them to compensate for their initial disadvantage. Asymmetry, as a weapon of the weak, is thus only a dangerous mirage.

If the weak is forced to use asymmetry, the major powers can also legitimately wish for it, considering that the risks are less critical. The damage remains acceptable and politically assumed. Supremacy in engagement must limit the risk-taking inherent in warlike action. Military history shows, in fact, how uncertain the battle can be. Varon and his 86,000 soldiers would never have imagined being crushed by Annibal's 55,000 men at the Battle of Cannes in 216 BC. At dawn on 18 June 1815, Napoleon thought that Waterloo "must be a matter settled before noon". The First World War led to the fall of four centuries-old empires. The examples are countless. However, the building up of these defeated forces required considerable effort each time. In the total war, Ludendorff testifies to this energy which must mobilize an entire people, certainly on an economic and industrial level, but also in its social and psychological aspects. The shift towards asymmetry, voluntary rather than suffered, can therefore also be sought by the great powers, even if symmetrical confrontation is still possible. The latter nevertheless requires a considerable effort for a result that is too often random, even dangerous.

Apart from the nuclear guarantee, the cost and risks of conventional symmetrical confrontations thus partly explain the natural shift of conflicts towards asymmetry. The out-of-bounds war of Qiao Lang and Wang Xiangsui conceptualises and illustrates the essential nature of the asymmetrical approach and the diversity of possible lines of operation. Asymmetry is not only a one-off imbalance, it is also a theory, a concept. Finally, asymmetry seems paradoxically to satisfy both the weak and the strong, but for different reasons. However, making asymmetry the new strategic order could prove

dangerous.

The danger would consist in letting oneself be lulled to sleep by the sirens of the advocates of asymmetry and lowering the capacity threshold of military forces in a political and military logic of strict sufficiency. On the contrary, the whole spectrum of defence and security must be covered in order to protect our vital interests in the long term without stifling the economy by overburdening the security apparatus.

On the eve of the forthcoming presidential elections, the announcements of political programmes and intentions, all trends taken together, clearly show that the defence budget is a potential, but much coveted, adjustment variable. The theme of asymmetry could be perniciously exploited by suggesting that very light and very special forces, protected by a highly sophisticated and deThe theme of asymmetry could be perniciously exploited by suggesting that very light and very special forces, protected by a highly sophisticated environment and deployed in stand off & protection in air and maritime space, and engaged in an international environment would be able to meet all the security challenges not covered by nuclear safeguards. The exploitation of this leitmotiv would make all the more sense as the political will to commit substantial conventional forces ashore would be weak, given the cost of external operations and the risks of getting bogged down that are always possible. However, such an idea would overlook the usual shift described above from asymmetric to symmetric confrontation. Indeed, the limitations of the strategy used against the Taliban are clear: large numbers of special forces, supported by significant air assets and with state-of-the-art technology, are not in a position to win the decision. It is the complementary work of more conventional forces, used in area control missions, that will ultimately guarantee security. The Algerian war has amply demonstrated this.

Conversely, some states, well aware of the need for conventional forces, but no longer able to afford an autonomous, comprehensive, appropriate and technologically advanced array of such forces, are turning to Europe. Franco-German cooperation on the Tiger, the pooling of air transport fleets and the development of European centres of excellence^[1] are milestones that illustrate this trend. Although this tropism seems unavoidable and partially well-founded, it is nevertheless necessary to define the degree of residual national autonomy to be retained in order to guarantee the political freedom of action of the President of the Republic and the Government. At the same time, the European sharing of the security burden has major consequences for the armaments industries, which make it possible to generate efficient forces. Below a certain threshold, the cost of producing equipment is no longer inversely proportional to the quantity produced. The examples of the Leclerc tank and the Rafale are good proof of this. Governments must arbitrate by taking into account a multitude of parameters, particularly social and financial. It remains to be seen what the priorities are and, above all, more surely, what the political horizons are that, in the end, condition the choices. In view of the range of threats that the defence and security instrument must cover, the use of the issue of asymmetry, which is so obvious, must be avoided. Asymmetry is a stage, a protean characteristic of a conflict, but it does not in any way constitute a whole.

Ultimately, asymmetric conflicts seem to benefit from a convergence of interests from the perspective of both the weak and the strong, even if the motivations are different. Asymmetry is a constant in history, but it is not enough to win and symmetrical confrontation is imposed sooner or later as long as none of the belligerents disengage beforehand. If the Western democracies seem to be forced into these conflicts, which experts have quickly described as new types, in reality they could also seek them out. Less risky than symmetrical confrontations, more politically acceptable because the losses are suffered by professionals who have admitted the risks of the job, asymmetrical

wars would allow democracies to preserve their interests at the lowest cost. Since the balance of terror has transformed nuclear weapons into the supreme guarantor of peace between reasonable states, the challenge for the great powers could therefore be to seek to win only the wars they know they can win instead of seeking to win the wars they would be condemned to wage.

Win the war we wage or wage the war we win: that is the question.

1) One could cite that of Saint-Astier for the forces of law and order.

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