

Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict

Pathways toward terrorism and genocide

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What is (not) asymmetric conflict? From conceptual stretching to conceptual structuring

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ABSTRACT

In the second half of the 1990s, the label “asymmetric” conflict rose to prominence among scholars and strategists, as a term for capturing the rising challenge that violent non-state actors posed to the liberal world order. However, the concept soon became a catchphrase for a range of disparate phenomena, and other buzzwords arose to describe the threats of concern to decision-makers. Conceptual confusion beset the field. This article dissects the notion of asymmetric conflicts, and distinguishes between asymmetries involving differences in (1) status, (2) capabilities, or (3) strategies between belligerents. It argues that “asymmetric” conflicts can take numerous forms depending on the combination of differences present, and offers a blue-print for keeping track of the meaning of this concept in the hope of bringing greater precision to future debates.

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Introduction

As the Cold War drew to a close in the late-1980s, clashes involving direct battles between centralised state armies became a more distant prospect, and irregular conflicts emerged as the main challenge to the liberal world order (OECD, 2012, p. 18). Scholars and government-affiliated strategists in the West scrambled to find labels for describing the threat emanating from violent non-state actors, often possessing weak capabilities, but organised in a decentralised fashion and adept at adapting their strategies to make the most of their position as an underdog. Some identified this turn of events as “fourth-generation warfare” (Lind, Schmitt, & Wilson, 1989), others considered them emblematic of “low-intensity conflicts” (Dixon, 1989), “small wars” (Olson, 1990), “protracted social conflicts” (Azar, 1990), or “new wars” (Kaldor, 1999). Still others preferred to call them “asymmetric conflicts” (Mitchell, 1991). Use of the latter concept peaked in the late-1990s, when “asymmetric” warfare could refer to terror attacks, rebel bombings, computer viruses, nuclear proliferation and everything in-between, as long as antagonists failed to “fight fair” (Wilson, 1998) or “deviated from the norm” (Grange, 2000).

Intellectuals engaged in this debate often presented asymmetric warfare as a recent phenomenon, different from the traditional conflicts of the past, when frontlines had been transparent (see, for instance, Kaldor, 1999, pp. 14–30). Others applied the term to

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regular wars between states possessing “unequal power resources” (Paul, 1994, p. 3). However, since antagonists never have equal capabilities at their disposal, prudent strategists have – since time immemorial – aspired to leverage their own strengths and to exploit their opponent’s weaknesses (Blank, 2003, p. 4). “Labelling wars as asymmetric”, Smith (2008, p. 6) concludes, “is to me something of a euphemism to avoid acknowledging that my opponent is not playing to my strengths and I am not winning”. Crane (2013, p. 5) reaches the same conclusion, but expresses it in less diplomatic terms: “[t]here are [just] two approaches to waging war, asymmetric and stupid. Every competent belligerent looks for an edge over its adversaries”. Scholars thus dispute whether asymmetry is an unprecedented feature specific to modern warfare or a commonsensical occurrence present in conflicts between unequal belligerents since the dawn of time.

As the term could take on numerous and often outright incongruent meanings, it no longer helped structure strategic thinking on the challenges facing decision-makers. In the outset of the 2000s, the notion of “asymmetric conflicts” almost disappeared from the U.S. national security strategies, eclipsed by the attention dedicated to counterterrorism operations and counterinsurgencies (COIN operations) after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Buffaloe, 2006, pp. 3–6; Kilcullen, 2005). Nonetheless, in the latter half of the 2000s, the term made a comeback, both in the U.S. national security strategies and among academics (Arrequin-Toft, 2005). Despite the presence of a large range of other buzzwords competing for attention, “asymmetric conflict” serves as a convenient umbrella term for describing warfare between belligerents where legal status differences, power imbalances, or contrasting strategies are glaring.

But what do these asymmetries entail? And which of them should be considered as the defining characteristic(s) of “asymmetric conflict”? Since stable concepts are essential building blocks that enable researchers to accumulate knowledge, rather than speaking past one another, there is an urgent need to tackle these questions. We undertake this conceptual investigation in five steps. We first introduce the logic of concept structures (Goertz, 2006). Next, we operationalise conflicts where belligerents have different legal status; where one actor has much greater capabilities than the other; and where the parties pursue contrasting strategies. The last section catalogues the possible patterns of interaction between these three asymmetries. We refrain from proposing a definite definition of “asymmetric” conflicts and from mapping out its empirical extension, and instead stop at the conclusion that scholars and strategists alike should be more mindful of the shifting meanings attached to this contested concept if it is to remain a useful building block in their intellectual endeavours.

Detecting concept structures

As the notion of asymmetric conflicts caught on in the 1990s, it soon ran into “the travelling problem”. That is, as scholars and strategists designated an ever growing number of episodes as “asymmetric” conflicts, the meaning of the term became diluted. In his seminal article, Sartori (1970) argues that a concept denoting a larger number of cases must obtain a looser connotation, since it must be associated with fewer attributes if it is to “travel” further. This stance became conventional wisdom among social scientists until Collier and Mahon (1993) revisited his claims. Sartori had assumed that concepts are defined by an intersecting set of attributes, but his critics demonstrate that some concepts are defined by

the presence of one or another attribute from a longer list of associated traits. Goertz (2006, pp. 1–50) explains the difference between these concept structures.

For Sartori and those using classic concepts, “to define a concept is to give the conditions necessary and sufficient for something to fit into that category” (Goertz, 2006, p. 7). According to this logic, a set of attributes must be present for something to constitute an asymmetric conflict. If one trait from this set is missing, then the situation falls short of the definitional requirements. For Collier and Mahon (1993, p. 847) and those using family resemblance concepts, “there may be no single attribute that category members all share”. According to this logic, no feature might be present in all asymmetric conflicts, but certain commonalities bind them together. If one trait is missing, then the presence of some other substitutable attribute is enough for the situation to meet the definitional requirements. As a result, concepts associated with more attributes could, in fact, “travel” further.

Even though concept structures can differ along these lines, most scholars are content with listing the features associated with “asymmetric conflicts”. However, without stating what traits are necessary, sufficient, or substitutable, and explaining whether inclusion into this concept is a dichotomous matter of being either in or out, or a question of continuous degree, readers are left guessing at the latent concept structure. This problem is common in the literature in asymmetric conflicts, and explains much of the confusion in debates on the topic.

Nonetheless, asymmetric warfare is often understood as conflicts involving belligerents who differ either in terms of their legal status, power capabilities, or strategies (see, for instance, the definitions offered in Buffaloe, 2006, p. 17; Gross, 2010, p. 13; Metz & Johnson, 2001, p. 5).¹ In practice, this implies warfare between a state actor and a non-state actor; warfare between an actor possessing strong capabilities and an actor with scarce resources; or warfare between actors pursuing different strategic campaign plans in the confrontation. When all these features are present, it is easy to recognize an “asymmetric conflict”. But is it enough for two, or just one, of these attributes to be present for a conflict to be included into this class of conflicts? Is one dimension perhaps more fundamental than the others? Intellectuals disagree with one another over these important questions. The connotations associated with asymmetric conflicts are represented in Figure 1.

If we start from a classic concept structure, then only conflicts featuring all three attributes (in the central intersection in Figure 1) are “asymmetric”. Those missing one trait fail to meet the definition. However, if we start from a family resemblance concept structure, then the label can be extended to a much wider range of conflicts, since these can be more or less “asymmetric” as long as at least one of the three characteristics are present. Of course, some scholars see certain traits as more important than others, and thus position themselves in-between these poles. Regardless, Figure 1 enables us to trace the confusion afflicting debates on “asymmetric” conflicts, and sketch out the contours of this contested concept in the subsequent sections.

Differences in legal status

“Asymmetric” conflicts are associated with confrontations between belligerents with different legal status (Gross, 2010, p. 13; Mack, 1975; Stepanova, 2008, p. 19). In the

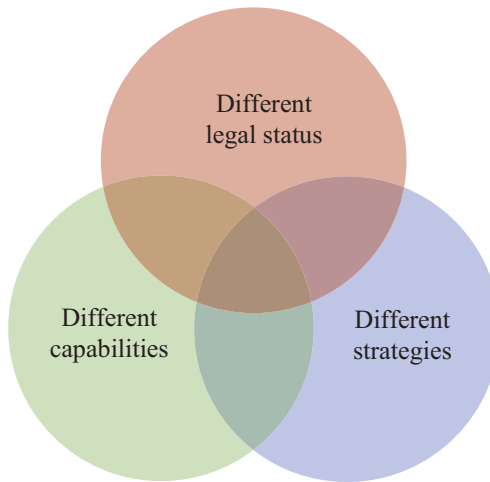


Figure 1. Attributes associated with belligerents participating in “asymmetric” conflicts.

modern Westphalian international order, the principal dividing line runs between *state actors* and *non-state actors*. State actors are recognized as sovereign inside their territorial jurisdiction and possess centralized armed forces whereas non-state actors lack international recognition and operate under a more diffuse chain of command. State-led counterinsurgencies and counterterrorism operations are hence both asymmetric confrontations, albeit of somewhat different strands (Amidror, 2010; Sloan, 1998). State-led efforts to suppress separatists also ought to fall under this label, even though the non-state actor in this situation aspires for recognition as a state actor – different from, but equal to, the state from which it seeks independence (Stepanova, 2008, pp. 28–53). If confrontations between state actors and non-state actors are “asymmetric”, then Colombia’s struggle against FARC guerrillas, the U.S. fight against Al-Qaeda terrorists, and Croatia’s war on separatists in the Republic of Serbian Krajina should all fit the label.

Metz and Johnson (2001, p. 11) assume that states have the moral high ground in such conflicts, and see non-state challengers as dark knights. Gross (2010, p. 14) takes a similar stance, describing states as “the building blocks of the international order and the only legitimate purveyor of armed force”. State actors thus possess a moral advantage when fighting terrorists, but the tables are turned in “wars of national liberation”, when separatists can appeal to the principle of self-determination (Gross, 2010, p. 14). In conflicts with guerrillas, states often retain the moral upper hand, unless using their firepower against opponents for dubious ends, as the U.S. did in Vietnam, when conducting aerial bombardment of civilian localities using napalm (Mack, 1975, p. 186).

Winter (2011, p. 488) has investigated the discourse on “asymmetric” conflicts and concludes that the concept, in particular among government-affiliated strategists, is used to “distinguish between civilized and uncivilized warfare, an idiom that converts [...] differences between state and non-state actors into moral and civilizational hierarchies”, in effect enabling “states to be portrayed as victims of non-state actors”. Some states have, in fact, sought to change international laws governing the conduct of warfare to lessen the protections afforded to non-state combatants (Pfanner, 2005; Schmitt, 2007; von Heinegg, 2011).² Whether this is an attempt from state actors to transfer their moral

advantage into the legal domain or an appropriate response to non-state actors, who themselves have grown ever more adroit in flouting the laws of war, is a matter of interpretation.

However, this pressing normative debate should be decoupled from the definition of asymmetric conflict. Scholars are disputing the ethical implications that stem from the legal status of the belligerents, rather than the claim that conflicts between state actors and non-state actors are “asymmetric”. Differences in legal status are, on the other hand, often linked to differences in capabilities and differences in strategies, to which we turn next.

Differences in capabilities

Conflicts between actors possessing different capabilities are also seen as “asymmetric” (Buffaloe, 2006, p. 17; Metz & Johnson, 2001, p. 10; Paul, 1994, p. 3). Capabilities first and foremost refer to armaments, but also to technological, economic, demographic, and other structural resources that can be converted for power projection on the battlefield and its domains.³ Material imbalances of this kind are, of course, present in almost all conflicts. Rational actors “go to war when they feel they have the upper hand”, as Gross (2010, pp. 13–14) observes, but in asymmetric conflicts the difference in capabilities is “glaring” or outright “monopolistic” (see also Stepanova, 2008, pp. 17–18). The *weaker actor* lacks sophisticated armaments, such as aircraft carriers, long-range missiles, radars, or networked command and control systems, and cannot muster the manpower, economic resources, technological competence, or other structural assets required to confront the *stronger actor* on equal terms.

Differences in capabilities often reflect differences in legal status. State actors are more powerful than non-state actors, as a rule of thumb. States can gather manpower through conscription, finance its armed forces through taxation, and produce or at least purchase advanced armaments on the international market. Unless the non-state actor controls a specific territorial domain in which the draft is enforced, soldiers have to be attracted either through ideological appeals or with the lure of cash. Moreover, their economic resources can seldom compete with the coffers of the state. Even non-state actors skilled at amassing funds from extortion, organized crime, or smuggling face difficulties in procuring high-tech armaments, unless another state steps in as their patron. As a result, states often wield armed forces capable across all domains of warfare whereas non-state actors make do with firearms and improvised explosive devices, as in the case of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

However, confrontations between actors possessing different capabilities need not involve actors of different legal status. According to Paul (1994, p. 3), conflicts “in which two states with unequal power resources confront each other on the battlefield” are also “asymmetric”. He points to the 1982 British-Argentine war over the Falklands as an example. Pfanner (2005, p. 152) lists the 1990–91 Gulf War between the U.S.-led coalition, equipped with state of the art precision-guided munitions, and Iraq as another case in point. On the other hand, some non-state actors are so successful in accumulating capabilities that their deficit on the battlefield no longer seems “glaring”. Consider the Republic of Transdniestria, an unrecognized *de facto* state with ample access to Russian munitions and thousands of men in arms, who have fended off Moldova’s claims over this

jurisdiction for almost three decades (Blakkisrud & Kolsto, 2011; King, 2001). Thus, “asymmetric” conflicts can entail either differences in legal status, differences in capabilities, or differences in both aspects.

Differences in strategies

It gets more complicated, however, because belligerents pursuing different strategies towards one another are also considered as participants in “asymmetric” conflicts (Arreguin-Toft, 2001, 2005; Cassidy, 2003, p. 7, 2008). In these confrontations, actors aspire to “maximize one’s own advantages [or] exploit an opponent’s weaknesses” (Metz & Johnson, 2001, p. 5). To be sure, belligerents have done this ever since Sun Tzu (1910/2000) compiled his insights into “The Art of War” over two millennia ago (Buffaloe, 2006, pp. 7–8),⁴ but in “asymmetric” conflicts the parties use different tactical tools to pursue altogether different campaign plans. In short: one actor pursues *direct strategies* targeting their opponent’s fighting capabilities whereas the other actor opts for *indirect strategies* targeting their opponent’s fighting willingness (Bartholomees, 2008, p. 34).

Differences in strategies often reflect both differences in legal status and in capabilities. In the classical case, a strong state actor, whose *raison d’état* is to defend its territorial borders, uses a centralized chain of command to plan for pitched battles on established frontlines but instead confronts a weak non-state actor using decentralized command structures to plan for hit-and-run operations. The armed forces of a state, consisting of tens of thousands of soldiers or more, are reliant on an intricate web of support functions, which in turn presume hierarchical control. State actors thus prefer direct, concentrated, or “Clausewitzian” battles, in which their overwhelming firepower can be applied. In order to avoid confronting a stronger state actor on its terms, weaker non-state actors favour indirect, dispersed, or “Fabian-Maoist” battles consisting of hit-and-run attacks (Cassidy, 2003, p. 7, 2008). Since holding terrain leaves them vulnerable to retaliation, insurgents scatter to sustain their scarce resources. These tactics are often successful when rebels operate in familiar terrain and obtain support from locals. As Mao Tse-tung (1937) concluded: guerrillas should move amongst the people as fish swimming in the sea. Non-state actors thus benefit from blurring the distinction between combatants and non-combatants.

Insurgents have another strategic resource that their state opponents often lack: a readiness to accept sacrifice, or *Opferbereitschaft* as Münkler (2005) calls it. Most states are loath to accept the surrender of non-state actors, let alone to negotiate with them, as this risks legitimizing their actorhood (Bartholomees, 2008, p. 33). But the greater the sacrifice we demand from our opponent, the greater resistance he will put up, von Clausewitz (1873/1976, p. 81) reminds us.⁵ As a result, rebels often see no option but to continue their struggle until the bitter end. States can seldom muster the same degree of determination, in particular when bringing in soldiers from distant lands (Betts, 2000, p. 46; Mack, 1975, p. 177). This pattern is reflected in the French fight against the Algerian National Liberation Front in the 1960s, the Russian struggle against Chechen separatists in the 1990s, the U.S.-led battle against Iraqi insurgents in the 2000s, and in other cases when the armed forces of the metropolitan state no longer were defending their home turf or families – other than in an allegorical sense. The main challenge facing states is therefore to maintain morale among its soldiers and popular support for the engagement

back home. Insurgents are cognizant of this fact and do not seek to defeat their opponents on the battlefield, but to drain their willingness to fight through prolonged wars of attrition (Arreguin-Toft, 2001).⁶

If outgunned non-state actors avoid confronting stronger state actors in pitched battles, and succeed in undermining their determination, then insurgents can emerge victorious. “[T]he guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win”, as Kissinger (1969, p. 39) once concluded. Research suggests that democracies, in particular, are prone to lose counterinsurgencies due to the electoral impact of war weariness (Merom, 2003).⁷ Even states with superior capabilities thus risk being outwitted through strategic manoeuvring. But advice is inconsistent. Galula (1964) recommends counterinsurgencies to focus on winning the hearts and minds of the locals (see also Buffalo, 2006, p. 16). Arreguin-Toft (2001, p. 109) argues that retribution against civilians could induce them to cease supporting rebels, though this tactic often backfires. He therefore advises decision-makers to create special operation forces trained for COIN-missions; a counsel taken up in the U.S., which set up the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command in 2006.⁸ Souleimanov (2015) and Souleimanov and Aliyev (2015, 2017) instead stress the importance of co-opting former rebels into the state’s embrace as a means of gathering inside knowledge and thus prevent insurgencies from gathering steam.

However, confrontations between actors pursuing different strategies also occur when belligerents share the same legal status, when both parties have similar capabilities at their disposal, or both. According to Gross (2010, pp. 19–20), states “sometimes find it advantageous to let others do their fighting” and therefore engage their opponent using proxies. He points to Hezbollah, a militant Shiite organization representing Iran’s interests in the Levant, as one example. It has directed hit-and-run attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets, including civilian ones, designed to drain their willingness, rather than their capabilities, to fight. Russia has also made use of proxies to stop countries in the near abroad from leaving its orbit. It has utilized state-owned corporations as agents of influence, dispatched “little green men” to Ukraine, conducted “active measures” to sow polarization, and coaxed organized crime groups into doing the Kremlin’s bidding abroad (Galeotti, 2017a, 2017b; Thornton, 2016). In both these cases, one actor is resorting to indirect strategies in otherwise regular conflicts to avoid retaliation and to undermine the political determination of their opponents to persist in the confrontation.

Conclusions

Much ink has been spilled on the topic of “asymmetric” warfare since scholars and strategists began dedicating their intellectual energies to irregular conflicts in the 1990s. Yet, there is no consensus as to the meaning of this concept, despite – or perhaps because of – its widespread usage. All too often, authors offer a laundry list of associated features and sporadic examples, thus forcing readers to engage in text exegesis. In order to reduce the conceptual confusion besetting the field, this article set out to dissect the notion of “asymmetric” conflicts.

Based on a close reading of the prior academic literature, it distinguishes between three asymmetries involving belligerents possessing (1) different legal status, (2) different

capabilities, or (3) using different strategies. What do each of these differences entail? In the first case, the confrontation stands between a *state actor* and a *non-state actor*. In the second instance, the conflict involves a *strong actor*, equipped with advanced armaments and technological, economic, demographic, and other structural resources that can be put to use on the battlefield, fighting a *weak actor* with a glaring lack of access to these same capabilities. In the third and final conflict situation, one actor adheres to *direct strategies* targeting their opponent’s fighting capabilities whereas the other actor makes use of *indirect strategies* targeting their opponent’s fighting willingness.

Since scholars seldom state which (combination of) features should be present for a conflict to count as “asymmetric”, this article offers a blue-print for tracing the connotation of this contested concept. The possible interaction effects, first plotted in [Figure 1](#), are catalogued in [Table 1](#). It maps out the spectrum of possible “asymmetries”, from those involving just one difference (white rows) to those featuring two differences (grey rows) and, last but not least, those where the entire set of differences are present at once (the dark row).

[Table 1](#) illustrates that “asymmetric” conflicts can take on numerous meanings depending on the latent concept structure (Goertz, 2006, pp. 39–50). If we start from a classic concept structure, then the term “asymmetric” should be reserved for those conflicts where all three differences are present, as in the case of the First Chechen War between the Russian Federation and Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. It is the intersection of all features that makes a confrontation “asymmetric”. If we start from a family resemblance concept structure, then the label can extend to conflicts where either one of the three differences are present. Each attribute can substitute for the others. Choosing between these standpoints is no simple task as both have good and bad consequences.

Restricting the connotation of the term to its classical meaning has the benefit of imbuing it with clear contents and preventing conceptual stretching, or “vague, amorphous conceptualizations” as Sartori (1970, p. 1034) calls them. It becomes easier to see what asymmetric conflicts are *not* if confrontations missing one trait fall short of the definition. But, we also risk missing the chance to make fruitful comparisons, since the concept is discarded in cases where significant similarities are at hand (Collier & Mahon, 1993, p. 852). If membership in the class of asymmetric conflicts is not a dichotomous “all or nothing” matter, but rather an issue of degrees, then we need to build a continuous concept to detect the existence of borderline cases (Goertz, 2006, pp. 29, 34). As a result, it might seem prudent to conclude that it is enough for either attribute to be present for the conflict to be “asymmetric”, thus permitting usage of the concept in its peripheral sense (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Types of asymmetric conflicts.

Different legal status	Different capabilities	Different strategies	
Yes	No	No	
No	Yes	No	Peripheral meaning
No	No	Yes	
Yes	Yes	No	
No	Yes	Yes	Regular meaning
Yes	No	Yes	
Yes	Yes	Yes	Classical meaning

Yet, differences in legal status, capabilities, and strategies are so common that the concept then is in danger of overextension. Most modern wars involve non-state actors challenging state authorities (PRIO, 2018). Almost all confrontations involving the U.S. could, due to its superior capabilities, be labelled “asymmetric” (Stepanova, 2008, p. 15). And the search for strategic leverage can propel actors, even in regular conflicts, to use proxies for draining the political determination of their opponents (Jonsson & Seely, 2015, pp. 4–5). It is dubious if cases as disparate as the conflict over Serbian Krajina, the British-Argentine Falklands War, and Russia’s subversion efforts in Ukraine belong under the same label. Perhaps it is wiser to require that two of the three differences are present so that conflicts are “asymmetric” in the more regular use of the term (see Table 1).

Even in the latter case, there is a need to decide whether all dimensions can substitute for one another, if one feature should be weighted as more important, or if one difference is so essential that its presence is required for a conflict to be “asymmetric”. For instance, some authors assume that differences in capabilities generate differences in legal status and differences in strategies, hence assigning the former dimension a primordial role. It is outside the remit of this article to inspect all these possibilities, to arrive at a definite definition of the concept, and to map its empirical extension. But our conceptual blue-print serves to highlight the shifting meaning attached to the notion of “asymmetric” conflicts. It could, thus, help inject greater precision into future debates if scholars focus on assessing how its constituent dimensions combine to form the overarching concept.

Notes

1. RAND’s (n.d.) conceptualization of “asymmetric warfare” takes notice of all three dimensions: “conflicts between nations or groups that have disparate military capabilities and strategies”.
2. A case in point is the U.S. debate on the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” under George W. Bush.
3. Strategists often speak of five distinct domains: land, sea, air, space, and information operations.
4. “All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive. [...] If he is in superior strength, evade him. [...] Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected”, Sun Tzu (1910/2000, p. 3–4) recommends the readers of his treatise.
5. “A war fought for great purposes implies willingness to accept casualties even in large numbers”, as Luttwak (1995) has phrased it.
6. Some scholars suggest that this preference for indirect tactics of attrition, drawing on a larger dose of communal *Opferbereitschaft*, reflect an “Asian” or “Eastern” strategic mindset, different from the “American” or “Western” preference for direct and decisive battles (Metz & Johnson, 2001, p. 12; Cassidy, 2003, p. 53).
7. Autocrats controlling the media can conceal their own losses and use of retributive tactics against rebels.
8. However, even the best trained and equipped special units face difficulties in operating in unfamiliar terrain, in particular if the local population does not support them.

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