



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S COMMENTARY

ASYMMETRIC WARFARE: A DOCTRINE TO FIT THE TIMES¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A common failure in much of today's mainstream thinking is the belief that asymmetric warfare can be stopped by conventional warfare. This is not to say that we do not need strong conventional warfare forces and capabilities. Addressing the use of asymmetric methods in conventional warfare is important. But equally important is a strategy to counter transnational asymmetric terrorism (TAT). Because threats can come from so many unexpected sources, when attempting to provide security today, governments need to cast wider and wider nets for information gathering with potential for abuse in the securing of information.

Inherent in the price of freedom is acceptance of a certain degree of risk to life and property. Regrettably, one cannot protect everything everywhere, all the time. To effectively manage costs of security in terms of civil liberties and unlimited expenditure of funds, nations should adopt a doctrine of 'acceptable losses'. Presented here are nine options for consideration by policymakers when designing strategies to mitigate transnational asymmetric terrorism (TAT) within a framework of acceptable losses and sustainable costs.

Asymmetric warfare is not new. History is replete with use of new weapons technologies, new tactics, and creative use of existing technologies.

What is new is the increasingly global impact and accessibility through media of local conflicts in a world that is increasingly linked by the relatively free movement of people, goods, money, and information.

What is new is the proliferation of ever-newer technologies and their widespread availability to the man in the street—with a trend in decentralization of power from nation states to networks and individuals.

And historically speaking, what is also relatively new is the concept of western democracies with their concepts of individual freedoms and human rights and the legal protections afforded those in democratic nations who may support asymmetric conflicts in varying degrees protected by law.

I would like to be able to say use of migration and perpetuation of refugees as a tool of warfare is new as well. But unfortunately this is a long established practice of many nations. Take for example some nations in the Middle East where actively perpetuating the Palestinian refugee crisis suits ideological and geopolitical agendas. Clearly from the humanitarian point of view, this is a tragic and

¹ Remarks by Raphael Perl before the Conference: *Asymmetric Warfare, Conflict of the Past, the Present and the Future*, November 9-10, 2016, *Stefania Palace, Budapest*. Raphael Francis Perl is the Executive Director of the Partnership for Peace Consortium. The viewpoints expressed herein are his personal viewpoints and as such are subject to critical review and change.

reprehensible practice. Refugee populations tend to be innocent victims fleeing for their lives, and taking advantage of such human misery complicates attempts by the international community to help them. That said, we are seeing new and disturbing developments in the Middle East in the form of the active generation of massive refugee flows to Europe and beyond.

Another example one could cite is that of Cuba's Mariel Boatlift in 1980 when the USA expressed a willingness to accept Cuban refugees and Fidel Castro agreed --reportedly also opening the prison doors for refugee status to hardened criminals and the doors of insane asylums as well.

A common failure in much of today's mainstream thinking is the belief that asymmetric warfare can be stopped by conventional warfare. This is not to say that we do not need strong conventional warfare forces and capabilities—the threat from nation states remains ever present. Moreover, in many ways, conventional warfare – including economic warfare through sanctions and other means – can mitigate asymmetric strategies and tactics by adversaries. A downside here is the long term financial cost of such mitigation, making it difficult to maintain indefinitely.

One used to know when wars were over. The 30 years war, the 100 years war, WWI and WWII. But things have changed. More and more today the war is over when the people - and not the government - say the war is over. Without decisive victories, asymmetric conflicts tend to drag on and become processes that are self-perpetuating.

Part of what is at play here is that peace and nonviolence are not always shared values and goals. It is important that Western policymakers take this into account. In negotiations, we may seek peace as an outcome, but our counterparts or adversaries may

regard our desire for peace as a confirmation of weakness. Their long-term plan, whether motivated by greed, grievance, political ideology, religion, or territorial expansion, may be conquest through violence—or simply to inflict damage justified by longstanding precepts such as honor and revenge. Violence is part of the human genome. Peace is more the exception than the norm.

I would now like to narrow the perspective of my remarks on conflict and asymmetric warfare to a current major source of concern to all of us: transnational asymmetric terrorism (TAT). In doing so, I recognize that addressing the use of asymmetric methods in conventional warfare is important, especially since several regional wars are going on as we speak, but this is a separate topic for discussion at another time.

Since transnational asymmetric terrorism occurs only intermittently, many people think it is possible to defend against it completely or even relatively completely. In my opinion such thinking is flawed. It is an illusion to think we can protect everything, everywhere, all the time.

Even if one collects all the information on everyone in a country from phone calls, emails, financial records, vehicle license plate movements, cell phone tower triangulations, transportation manifests, surveillance cameras, public records, credit card transactions, social media, and more – and then dedicates endless funds and analysis to detect sinister patterns, one will continue to have unstoppable “lone wolf” attacks with terror-like impact. And furthermore, how much safer are we really in the end with the government collecting data on every aspect of our lives? Frankly I'm not sure, and I suspect others have their doubts as well.

The dilemma is that in a world where power and access to weaponry are increasingly decentralized,

the demands of citizenry for governments to provide security is growing. Because threats can come from so many unexpected sources, when attempting to provide security today, governments need to cast wider and wider nets for information gathering.

On the other hand, the abuse of such information is practically guaranteed: hackers breaching government data bases, the release of confidential data by often well-meaning whistle blowers. Moreover, occasional criminality, corruption, discrimination and exploitation of information for personal and political gain at the top levels of government is impossible to prevent, and has been widely reported over the course of history. Giving the human nature of those in power, the control of substantial information on everyone in a country poses major challenges to the western concepts of individual liberty and democracy as we know them today.

So what do we do—how do we maintain security in an environment regularly threatened by transnational asymmetric terrorism without living our lives in nations that adopt many of the attributes of ‘police states’?

One option when responding to TAT would be to adopt a doctrine of ‘acceptable losses.’ Inherent in the price of freedom is acceptance of a certain degree of risk to life and property. Let me be clear. This is not capitulation to terrorism. On the contrary, all reasonable means available should be used to mitigate transnational asymmetric threats.

Major policy issues involved in adopting such an approach center on maintaining cost-effectiveness and preserving of civil liberties. For example, murders and nonnegligent manslaughter in the US for 2015 were close to 15,700, and 35,000 people have died in the United States in traffic accidents.

Given such dramatic casualty levels, is it reasonable for a nation such as the U.S. to spend \$40 billion on homeland security instead of using much of that money in other ways? Policy critics note that the total number of terrorism-related casualties in the entire history of the country is minimal by comparison with the casualty figures from crime and accidents for a single year.

Just as a disease can become endemic if not suppressed rapidly, terrorism has not been suppressed in the past half century and has become an ongoing process and a micro-economy of its own. There are many similarities between diseases and terrorism. A disease may have vectors or symbiotes as cooperating organisms. Terrorists need banks, money launderers, and weapons suppliers. A disease needs a host. Terrorists need societies or subcultures that support their goals. Like with disease, once the process of terrorism takes hold in a widespread fashion, concerted efforts against it are often too late, are very expensive and generally have limited effectiveness without global consensus on elimination of the problem. That level of consensus is very difficult to obtain.

Consequently, a doctrine of “acceptable losses” is applicable to our times. Protect vital infrastructure, both physical and cyber. Harden other significant targets where such measures are cost-effective. Train the population in vigilance and provide convenient ways for people to report suspicious activity. Adequately fund local law enforcement agencies and federal backup teams. Identify potential incubators of terrorism and surgically mitigate or disrupt them. Provide commercial or federally backed terrorism insurance, similar to flood insurance or other programs, to cover damages and casualties from terrorist acts or other asymmetric attacks.

Current commercial insurance policies often do not cover terrorism. This needs to change.

So what should we do to mitigate transnational asymmetric terrorism?

Here are some suggestions with room for an active role for the military if desired.

- 1.** Implement a doctrine of “acceptable losses” and stop spending unnecessarily on countermeasures beyond the limit of cost-effectiveness.
- 2.** Promote contingency planning at all levels of government. This will be helpful not only for anti-terrorism but also for natural disasters and other disruptions. For example, during a recent hurricane in the U.S. there was a gasoline shortage that impeded evacuation of a coastal area. How could this be avoided in the future? Promote individual contingency planning against disruptions and threats. Use mass media on a regular basis to promote such planning by communities and families. This was done during the Cold War, and we are now in a new war against transnational asymmetric terrorism.
- 3.** Encourage the establishment and regular testing of emergency communications methods, such as dial-up Internet access by the public to emergency servers, planned support by amateur radio volunteers and National Guard signals technicians, a cooperative infrastructure among cell phone providers to enable recognition of nonsubscriber phones and processing at no charge during emergencies of low-bandwidth text messages.
- 4.** Identify sources that actively promote and export violent extremism, and ensure that they are contained and neutralized to the extent possible.
- 5.** Educate populations in vigilance and encourage reporting of suspicious activities. Ensure adequate

staffing resources to process reports and “connect the dots” to discover potential threats. And yes, those dots will not include all information on everyone from birth till death. Some threats will be missed, but that is price of freedom.

- 6.** Reformulate economic planning to increase resiliency. This will be at odds with our current approach of optimizing everything to the maximum from a cost standpoint with “just-in-time” inventories, hospital beds at full capacity, the electrical grid near its limits, and centralization of resources and control. But it is necessary. For example, there are very few hospitals relative to the populations of urban centers, and the beds are often filled to capacity. An unexpected incident involving mass casualties may be met with a chaotic response of questionable efficacy, depending on decisions made at the time. If a terrorist attack includes the hospitals, which are difficult targets to harden, what is the contingency plan? We need more redundancy, and must be willing to trade off the additional profits resulting from centralized economies of scale against the safety factor provided by multiplicity of resources. This requires long-term planning, and will involve major policy changes and decades of effort to implement.
- 7.** Form specialized coalitions with partners – even unlikely ones – with shared interests in combating transnational asymmetric terrorism. Exchange best practices, where security concerns do not restrict such sharing. The U.S. and Russia likely have much in common in this area.
- 8.** Actively keep the military engaged, not only in intelligence gathering, communications, contingency planning, logistical and personnel support to law enforcement and disaster control and relief. Engage the military in refugee management and health emergency operations as well.

9. Finally—no war, no campaign can be successfully waged defensively. In combatting TAT, the military should—to the maximum degree permitted by law—adapt and mirror the organizational and operational structures of those who physically threaten our national security and democratic way of life. This means a greater reliance on special operations forces and the skills they can bring to bear on today’s TAT conflict environment.

It is time to stop talking about solutions and start implementing them. More than a decade after the attacks of September 11, 2001, we still do not have a consensus on what constitutes transnational asymmetric terrorism and how to measure the effectiveness of our defensive and offensive actions against the enemy. Let us compare the war on terrorism with the war on illegal drugs. After half a century and hundreds of billions of dollars spent, we continue to have a major problem globally with illegal drugs. Do we really think that we have any realistic hope of eradicating transnational asymmetric terrorism, a phenomenon with much greater appeal to many than illegal drugs? It is a situation that demands proactive policies, not frenzied second-guessing about attacks in hindsight with later implementation of policies that may have worked to defend against the previous attack but will not work to stop the next one.

My hope for this conference is that we can use it to formulate realistic action plans that can be carried back to our home countries to serve as input for policy discussions. This is a time to take decisions, not to sit on the fence and take reactive measures after an incident. Eventually, transnational asymmetric terrorism may rear its head in any of our home countries, and we must be ready for it without destroying our freedom through government attempts to be omniscient.

If I am wrong, please prove me wrong. I would like very much to be shown that my conclusions are erroneous, that we can indeed—under current largely defensive policies—successfully deter or protect against asymmetric warfare. If any of you has a solution, please share it with your colleagues. Let us work together rapidly and cooperatively during our time together and bring home realistic action plans that our governments will take seriously. We know that certain safeguards have helped such as intelligence gathering, document security, monitoring of travel to regions where terror is incubated, monitoring of paths of funding, and political and military cooperation with partners. Notwithstanding, these are partial measures at best. What we arguably need are fundamental realignments of governmental and societal priorities. I hope we can achieve them while there is still time. Thank you for your attention.

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