Strategic Asymmetric Deception and Its Role in the Current Threat Environment

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Abstract

President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, once stated that the post-Cold War world of the 1990s was a "paradox [where] American military superiority actually increase[d] the threat of... attack against [the U.S.] by creating incentives for adversaries to challenge us asymmetrically." He was alluding to the fact that the Cold War's closure was supposed to bring about a situation that encouraged peace, nation-building, and unilateral comfort for the United States. The reality that America has come to know is quite different, and some might even argue that, given the option, many people would return to a security situation comparable to the bipolar world of the Cold War.

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Introduction

President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, once stated that the post-Cold War world of the 1990s was a "paradox [where] American military superiority actually increase[d] the threat of... attack against [the U.S.] by creating incentives for adversaries to challenge us asymmetrically."[1] He was alluding to the fact that the Cold War's closure was supposed to bring about a situation that encouraged peace, nation-building, and unilateral comfort for the United States.[2] The reality that America has come to know is quite different, and some might even argue that, given the option, many people would return to a security situation comparable to the bipolar world of the Cold War.

A newly materialized (or at least recognized) "asymmetric adversary" is the current source of this uneasiness and virtual disorientation in Western societies.[3] Asymmetric warfare is as old as warfare itself and revolves around the weaker entity (state or non-state actor) using its strengths to exploit the apparent weaknesses of the stronger entity. Rod Thornton, author of one of the definitive books on asymmetric warfare, comes to the conclusion that finding a singular, end-all-be-all definition for this "term du jour" is pointless. He claims that each published definition is relative to the sphere of influence where the conflict originates; specifically the protagonist's home nation and the realm of security in question (i.e. land warfare, naval warfare, human intelligence, geospatial intelligence, etc.).[4] Though it is largely slanted towards the viewpoint of the United States and other democratic nation-states—and therefore ethnocentric to some extent—the following is a proposed working descriptor for *asymmetric warfare*:

> "Asymmetric warfare comprises attempts to circumvent or undermine an opposing force's strengths while exploiting his weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The weaker party does this using methods that differ significantly from the apparently stronger party; the weaker party typically employs innovative, non-traditional tactics, weapons, or technologies that can be applied

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> at all levels of warfare—strategic, operational, and tactical—and
> across the spectrum of military operations."[5]

Thornton would argue that this definition is still deficient because it fails to mention the "inability to mirror" created by asymmetric approaches.[6] This idea indicates that the targeted country (i.e. the stronger state-actor) either cannot or will not exercise the same practices as his asymmetric foe. This may be due to some level of moral or ethical rectitude.[7] Asymmetric warfare plays on and tests American expectations as determined by cultural values, norms, and mores plus the tendency to transpose Western ideals on to the enemy. In short, what may morally compromise any given member of Western society might not have the same effect on the asymmetric actor. A clear cut example of this principle is the practice of Iraqi insurgent groups coaxing mentally-handicapped Arab men and women to don explosive-laden suicide vests and "martyr" themselves in local marketplaces. Americans and other Coalition members on the other hand expect competitors to "follow the rules of the game."[8] However, the capable asymmetric fighter seeks "ways to turn our strengths against us," as Congressman Ike Skelton so fittingly described.[9]

The weaker party's strengths may and often include:

1. Familiarity with and ability to traverse local terrain

2. Ability to easily mesh with the local populace, but claim non-affiliation if necessary (foreign fighters, freedom fighters/mujahedeen, jihadist, insurgents, guerillas, etc.)

3. Apparent disregard for Laws of Land Warfare; both Jus ad Bellum (justice of war) and Jus in Bello (justice in war)

4. Ability to affect social and domestic support for the opposing force (media images, black propaganda campaigns, etc.)

5. External support (monetary, weapons, training, logistics) from more robust State-Actors (e.g., Iranian support for Hizbollah); asymmetric adversaries are often the tip of the spear for offensive operations conducted in proxy warfare

Given that the primary goal of the weaker party is to exploit the opposing force's vulnerabilities, then it is highly probable that asymmetric approaches will employ deception as part of their strategy. One of the central themes of deception in military and intelligence undertakings is to increase the quantity and visibility of an opponent's weaknesses.[10] The

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goal is essentially to expose the enemy to further danger and exploitation in a willful manner. More importantly, this goal is achieved in a way that is unwitting to the enemy. It is clear that deception measures can be useful in asymmetric warfare; so the next issue to address is how one might encounter asymmetric deception and at what echelon: tactical, operational, or strategic.

The weaker asymmetric adversary may use deception measures to skew the information received by the opposing force. Consequently, the information becomes compromised, diminished or misleading for purposes of misdirection. In the current threat environment, coalition forces face significant challenges in the education and practice of theater Rules of Engagement (ROE). If the asymmetric enemy can deceive the ground troops into an armed engagement based on flawed or false scenario information (i.e. a potential ROE violation), it is likely that the on-scene commander will be publicly ostracized by the likes of Al-Jazeera and liberal Western media sources. This vignette would precipitate a major propaganda success for the weaker asymmetric actor and the deterioration of public support for his opponent. Thus, the situation evolves into a victory for the weaker asymmetric opponent regardless of the result at the tactical level. If related scenarios transpire without interdiction, then momentum increases and the weaker protagonist achieves success on the Strategic level. Hearts and minds are lost on both sides based on the weaker actor's ability to "increase uncertainty" through the use of asymmetric deception.[11] At some point, the larger nation-state's war effort will ultimately fail if national support ceases for the conflict. This scenario has a very real-world salience as demonstrated by historical examples such as Vietnam.

Operational level asymmetric deception may be an even more daunting challenge. The reason being that planned and executed operations are fewer and further between within non-linear, asymmetric organizations such as al-Qaida. One might argue that the 9/11 scenario was a full-scale asymmetric operation and offensive in nature. The September 11 attacks took years of planning, logistical support, and training in order to bring about the end-state of the operation. Correspondingly, the deception associated with these events took place at the tactical and operational levels. At a tactical level, the young al-Qaida operatives training at American aeronautical institutes had to have credible cover plans with fortified backstopping. On the operational side, cells within the international terrorist network were "splintered" away from each other; isolated and unbeknownst to the overall cause in order to maintain operational security. Upon completion, the *immediate* fall out of the events was a strategic victory by all accounts for al-Qaida and all other global Islamic jihadists.

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Evidence of authentic strategic deception measures is hard to discern and document in the world of asymmetric warfare. Perhaps there will never be a clearly defined strategic-level deception effort carried out through asymmetric means, or maybe the efforts are so keenly planned and executed that no observable intelligence subsists near the cloak of deception. Yet if the observer can change his lens slightly and focus on the endgame, it is rational to say that *all* asymmetric warfare efforts and associated deception measures aim to yield strategic results.

Given that the nature of military and intelligence doctrine is to provide sound, principled guidance for proactive and responsive action, then how does one counter an adversary who utilizes asymmetric measures, which are inherently obtuse and unique to each application?[12] Especially with respect to asymmetric deception, every individual situation is bound to leave the ground commander or intelligence analyst saying, "I have never seen anything like this before. I do not know how to effectively respond."

How, then, can a strong state-actor counter asymmetric deception at all levels? One need only look to the Socratic philosophy that said "Know thyself." In defeating an opponent and re-leveling the playing field, it is important to look inward and understand one's own weaknesses. The goal is to identify any outstanding or prospect vulnerabilities. The protagonist nation-state must be humble throughout the process or it will ultimately be humbled by a lesser adversary. The next step is to risk mitigate the apparent vulnerabilities before the enemy has time to exploit them. Without flagrantly compromising moral fortitude, the stronger protagonist state must adapt and fight the enemy by employing tactics and methods that may be non-traditional. Here, the adage of "fighting fire with fire" may ring true. In deception and counter-deception, a greater presence of personnel from clandestine intelligence, paramilitary, and special operation organizations is also necessary. Conventional, linear units are not ideal for defeating or even matching asymmetric deception threats.

The corollary axiom to the "know thyself" credo of course is to "know thy enemy" as well. One of the greatest historical proponents of both deception and knowing the enemy was Sun Tzu. His seminal work, *The Art of War*, advocated several derivative questions for use in counter-deception efforts: Does the enemy have a history of using deception? Is there an inherent cultural bias either for or against the use of deception by the enemy? If such a template exists, how would it fit the current problem?[13]

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Conclusion

In summary, the defeat of this newly materialized force may hinge upon the larger nation-state's ability to make honest assessments of itself and know its own weaknesses. Furthermore, that nation must understand that every action taken by the asymmetric adversary, especially in the realm of deception, is geared toward strategic conquests. There are no small victories in the asymmetric fight; winning the conflict may be accomplished off the classical battlefield. And though strategic deception may be a most inscrutable and almost intangible concept, the stronger protagonist state can achieve success by locating and foiling the tactical and operational deception efforts of a capable asymmetric enemy.

About the Author

Seth A. Gulsby is a Captain in the Aviation branch of the U.S. Army. He received his commission from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 2006 where he was a four year letter recipient in Varsity Football. After West Point, Gulsby completed rotary-wing flight training at the Army's flight school in Ft. Rucker, AL, and now flies OH-58D Kiowa Warriors in the Air Cavalry. He completed his first tour in support of OIF in 2008 and is ramping up for a second deployment in March 2010. CPT Gulsby has thus far completed six courses in pursuit of a Master's in Intelligence Management through Henley-Putnam University.

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