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Asymmetric Warfare

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Asymmetric Warfare

*Whatever happens we have got,
The Maxim gun and they have not.*¹

Asymmetry in warfare can, at a very basic level, be defined as a conflict between forces whose military resources and capabilities are widely disparate; the strong versus the weak. Predictions of the outcome of any conflict between such disparate forces would favour the stronger combatant. Yet history demonstrates that this is not always the case. Between 1800 and 1999 the percentage of conflict victories won by the weaker combatant has risen from 11 per cent between 1800 and 1849 to 51.2 per cent between 1950 and 1999.²

As a body of theory Asymmetric Warfare is a relatively new concept. The term itself first appeared in the 1997 Quarterly Defense Review and definitions and theories of asymmetric warfare have been constantly evolving since then. Complicating the issue is the simple fact that an asymmetric conflict is not as simple to define as suggested above. Any situation where an opponent acts differently to maximise their advantages or exploit enemy weaknesses may be regarded as an example of asymmetry. And the action need not be military in a conventional sense but can include hostage-taking, acts of terrorism, NBC warfare and non-discriminate attacks on civilian populations amongst other courses of action. Conversely the use of joint forces in combined operations against insurgents and terrorist targets is an example of asymmetry being waged by conventional forces against opponents that do not enjoy the same level of resources.

Clearly an understanding of asymmetric warfare and how to effectively either employ it, or counter it, is of key importance to modern conventional armed forces, who increasingly find themselves engaged in non-conventional conflicts against what are perceived as weaker enemies.

This bibliography has been designed to provide a guide as to where to find information on asymmetric warfare. Please note that the list of references below is a selection of the more relevant titles and information on the subject. The list is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive but is an introductory guide to some of the resources available.

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