

## THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

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**Summary.** The article describes the problem of asymmetric conflicts, regarded as a threat to the security of countries and the international community in the contemporary world. The analysis of this issue includes an explanation of the following terms: asymmetry, asymmetric warfare, asymmetric action, asymmetric conflict and asymmetric enemy. The article also presents the specific nature of the area where asymmetric threats occur and the *modus operandi* of asymmetric conflicts. The article provides examples of asymmetric threats, which include the threat of terrorism (in particular suicide terrorism), cyberattacks, arms trade, illegal drug trade, psychological warfare, information warfare and economic warfare.

**Key words:** asymmetry, asymmetric warfare, asymmetric action, asymmetric conflict, asymmetric enemy, *modus operandi* of asymmetric conflicts

### INTRODUCTION

Asymmetric threats include terrorism, the threat of using weapons of mass destruction and information warfare [Kraj 2012, 33]. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11 September 2001 served as the basis for new reflections and analyses in the field of asymmetric threats. It is emphasised in source literature that “before 9/11, the category of asymmetric warfare was known only to a small group of experts” [ibid.]. This article also addresses the area where asymmetric conflicts occur and their *modus operandi*.

#### 1. THE NOTION OF ASYMMETRY, ASYMMETRIC WARFARE, ASYMMETRIC ACTION AND ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT

The word asymmetry comes from Greek and means breaking, violating or lacking a specific arrangement (symmetry). When we look at the etymology of *asymmetria*, it is translated as imbalance or disproportion. According to General Quesnott, “asymmetry is any form of threat for which state, coalition or allied structures are not prepared culturally, structurally, intellectually or from the point of view of legislation, administration or regulation, so they cannot react immediately, effectively and strongly” [Szubrycht 2006, 143].

Asymmetry concerns significant changes occurring in the security sector [Madej 2007, 9]. An important determinant of asymmetry is the process of globalisation [Rokiciński 2005, 154].

Asymmetric warfare is a small war or a conflict of decreased intensity, in

which countries or societies are threatened by state or non-state actors, such as terrorist groups [ibid., 155], freedom fighters and computer hackers, who attack in unconventional ways [Gawliczek and Pawłowski 2003, 31].

It is emphasised in the literature that “the appearance of new (non-state) actors on the scene with a high destructive potential has shown that societies at a high civilizational (technical) level are extremely susceptible to asymmetric attacks” [Kraj 2012, 34]. An increase in the number of non-state actors in international politics is a threat for asymmetric warfare [Rokiciński 2005, 157].

Asymmetric warfare is characterised by the lack of distinction between combatants and civilians, which is the foundation of contemporary humanitarian law [Kraj 2012, 34]. In asymmetric warfare, the participants use all possible measures of combat and, due to their brutality against civilians, it resembles total war [ibid.; Wasiuta and Wasiuta 2019, 25–46].

According to K. Piątkowski, asymmetric warfare differs in terms of its objectives, organisation, technique, methods of operation and reach [Piątkowski 2002, 24]. A similar opinion is expressed by B. Balcerowicz, according to whom the significant differences between symmetric and asymmetric warfare lie in the objectives of such wars (armed conflicts), the method of operation, the ways and sources of financing and the forms of violence [Balcerowicz 2003, 70–71].

Apart from the term “asymmetric warfare,” another term used in literature is “tearing wars,” in which foreign and native groups attack the orderly foundations required for the functioning of societies, using such means as terror and the destruction of IT and financial systems [Rokiciński 2005, 156].

Asymmetric actions “can be defined as a set of undertakings of a political, military and police nature aimed at counteracting the phenomena of globalization as an asymmetric enemy” [ibid., 158]. According to T. Szubrycht, a conflict “is asymmetric only when its sides have a different legal and international status (one of the participants is not an entity of international law)” [Szubrycht 2006, 141]. The uneven status of the opponents is also noted by H. Münkler, who uses the notion of the asymmetrisation of force, which means a situation characterised by an “unevenness of forces” [Münkler 2004, 10].

An asymmetric conflict is a type of conflict in which “a country and its armed forces have to confront an opponent whose objectives, organisation, means of fighting and methods of operating fall outside the conventional meaning of war [...]. Asymmetric warfare does not use the notion of a battlefield or a front, it is dispersed and its geographical and chronological continuity is not maintained” [Piątkowski 2002, 23–24]. Asymmetric conflicts are defined as a situation where “due to a disproportion in the military potential of other resources used in the conflict, as well as cultural differences, one of the sides decides to use methods, means and tactics that are unconventional from its opponent’s point of view. An asymmetric conflict may be waged by countries (an international conflict) or be internal (a separatist movement or an anti-government rebellion), its sides can also be a country and an external non-state entity, for example a terrorist organisa-

tion” [Madej 2007, 41–47].

According to experts from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, asymmetric threats are defined as “a threat emanating from the potential use of dissimilar means or methods to circumvent or negate an opponent’s strengths while exploiting its weaknesses to obtain a disproportionate result.”<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the above-mentioned terms, researchers also use the terms hybrid warfare, fourth-generation warfare, post-industrial warfare, global insurrection and strategic paralysis [Gruszczak 2011, 10]. As emphasised by A. Gruszczak, “in reference to contemporary armed conflicts, hybridisation can be understood as the concurrence of ‘old’ and ‘new’ elements of war, classic armed conflicts and ‘post-modern’ war, clashes of national armies and asymmetric conflicts, military super-technologies and primitive weapons, fighting for territories and resources and clashes over identity and values, the confrontation of provincialism and cosmopolitanism. Hybridisation may concern both a belligerent (a state, a non-state actor, an irregular armed group) and the area of the conflict (especially a battlefield), its genesis and nature (the ecosystem of the conflict)” [ibid., 11]. M. Evans expressed it as follows: “[...] we are confronted with a strange mixture of premodern and postmodern conflict – a world of asymmetric and ethno-political warfare – in which machetes and Microsoft merge, where apocalyptic millennials wearing Reeboks and Raybans dream of acquiring weapons of mass destruction” [Evans 2003, 137].

## 2. ASYMMETRIC ENEMY

The advantage of a country, such as the United States, with regard to conventional weapons, may serve as an incentive for its opponents to use asymmetric means [Kraj 2012, 33]. The Joint Vision 2020 document concludes that the necessity to deal with asymmetric threats constitutes one of the basic challenges for the US armed forces [Gawliczek and Pawłowski 2003, 21–23]. This statement is followed by the conclusion that the United States cannot be defeated as a result of symmetric actions, but it can be defeated in an asymmetric attack.

From a military point of view, an asymmetric enemy has the following characteristics [Rokiciński 2005, 159]: 1) it is not a party in light of international law; 2) those who participate in the fighting do not have the status of combatants (i.e. members of the armed forces of one of the belligerents); 3) the area of military operations is not determined [Rakowski 2017, 260]; 4) military operations are carried out using all the available measures of combat; 5) it usually does not comply with international law but rather customary or local law; 6) the enemy blends into the community, which makes it difficult to distinguish the enemy from other people in a given area.

An asymmetric enemy is a non-state or transnational organisation [Latoszek

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<sup>1</sup> *AAP-6 Słownik terminów i definicji NATO zawierający wojskowe terminy i ich definicje stosowane w NATO*, <https://wcnjik.wp.mil.pl/u/AAP6PL.pdf> [accessed: 06.11.2017].

and Proczek 2001, 27–57], which does not have the attributes of statehood, is not a subject of international law, and lacks territory, society and overt command and state administration structures [Rokiciński 2005, 160]. As emphasised in the literature, it is difficult to use the same methods of combating such an enemy in the military sphere, e.g. terrorists or pirates, and non-military sphere, e.g. illegal immigrants [ibid., 161].

An asymmetric enemy usually has a network structure and a flat hierarchy [Połuszna 2016, 174]. Groups of a dozen or so people working toward common goals form a rather complicated structure of connections, each usually without knowledge of the full organizational picture [ibid., 182]. Actions taken by this structure are difficult to detect and are usually financed by criminal activities. A network of independent units is usually difficult to detect and disrupt. What is conducive to the asymmetric actions taken by such structures is globalisation, the relative openness of borders in the Western world and the accessibility of communication infrastructure and the Internet [Piątkowski 2002, 25].

### 3. THE AREA OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

Due to globalisation, the area of asymmetric conflicts was extended to the whole world. Combat can take place in the territory of the opponent, the attacked country or a third country. It can also cover the territory of several countries [Ciekanowski 2009, 54]. This broad definition of the area of asymmetric conflicts means that any location can be threatened by asymmetric actions, which significantly hinders attempts to counteract such threats.

Asymmetric actions are “non-territorial,” which means that it is difficult to determine a clear-cut and geographically limited area in which they occur. An asymmetric enemy may start hostile actions at any time and place, stop them for some time [Połuszna 2016, 174] and resume them when it is convenient or when they seem to be justified.

According to K. Piątkowski, an entity waging asymmetric warfare is *ex definitione* waging a total war, with the aim of taking over a whole territory, society and resources [Piątkowski 2002, 24]. The aim of such actions is to maximise effects and minimise costs.

### 4. THE *MODUS OPERANDI* OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

Due to the lack of forces and resources, asymmetric enemies cannot participate in symmetric fighting, so they look for methods of fighting that evade the opponent's strengths and use its weaknesses against it [Rakowski 2017, 261]. Asymmetric methods of fighting include mostly suicide attacks, arms trading, drug trading, bombings, cyberattacks [ibid., 258, 260], economic warfare and psychological warfare. A characteristic feature of the methods and the means of fighting used by an asymmetric enemy is that they are acquired on the black mar-

ket or produced at home, as these means are usually cheap and easy to use. In this regard, it is not the intellectual level or expert skills of the makers that matter, but rather their motivation and determination to act. On the other hand, apart from the cheapest weapons and ammunition, an asymmetric enemy may use weapons that are incapacitating, anti-material, psychotronic, geophysical, anti-satellite or nuclear [Bujak 2005, 87–88].

In an armed struggle, the opponent of a given country avoids direct confrontations [Posłuszna 2016, 176] and uses unconventional methods. They include: 1) attacks on infrastructure in a given country or its citizens using conventional means, e.g. classic explosives, or unconventional means, e.g. ABC weapons; 2) illegal and harmful (to the economy and infrastructure) activities in cyberspace; 3) unfavourable propaganda campaigns in the media, which are intended to tarnish the image of the attacked country at the international level; 4) disruption of the economic situation in a given country.

What distinguishes the manner of operation and therefore determines the choice of methods is the mediagenic nature of the attack [ibid., 180]. Asymmetric enemies strive for a spectacular effect and want to create panic in the attacked society. Therefore, they want to pressure the authorities of the attacked country as much as possible – so along with the clear demands from the attacker, pressure is also applied by the members of the attacked society, who are frightened and want to force the authorities to fulfil their duty to ensure their safety.

E. Posłuszna draws attention to the fact that actions are focused on civilians (warfare among people), wars are based on ideas (information and propaganda warfare) and military actions consist of short clashes (swarming) [ibid.]. As is emphasised in literature, “When a potential attacker makes mistakes, it usually does not put itself at risk of suffering the consequences of its actions. Often one gap in a security system is enough to break it. It means that the defender needs to undertake many more actions than the attacking entity” [Rakowski 2017, 259]. This type of pattern becomes particularly significant in the case of information threats.

H. Münkler notes that a feature of the asymmetrisation of war violence is that forms of violence which were once perceived as subordinate become superior (e.g. guerrilla warfare and terrorism) [Münkler 2004, 10]. Terrorism is an offensive asymmetrisation strategy, in which terrorists make use of fear to test the resistance of a society, at the same time pursuing political objectives.

A characteristic element of the *modus operandi* of entities that conduct an asymmetric activity is using all the available means with an instrumental approach towards social rules and norms. What are also important are secrecy, variability and surprise [Piątkowski 2002, 25]. An asymmetric enemy blends into the society of the attacked country and remains undercover until the very attack, and is characterised by high determination and low political sensitivity (resistance to internal criticism) [Posłuszna 2016, 175].

T. Szubrycht notes that “the contemporary asymmetric enemy wins when it does not lose, and the international community loses when it does not win” [Szu-

brycht 2006, 143]. In this context, it is necessary to acknowledge the strategic advantage of an asymmetric enemy [Arrequin–Toft 2001, 93–128], which can achieve significant benefits (in terms of propaganda and psychology) while engaging minimum forces and resources. According to K. Piątkowski, can talk about the relative ease of waging asymmetric warfare: “the supporters of soldiers participating in asymmetric warfare are the Internet and mobile telephony, which allow immediate communication and ensure anonymity” [Piątkowski 2002, 26].

## CONCLUSION

This article addresses the problem of asymmetric conflicts, regarded as a special threat to the security of countries and the international community in the era of globalisation. The problem of asymmetric threats has been treated as a new challenge to the security sector since the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

The main conclusion of the article is that an asymmetric conflict is the opposite of a symmetric and conventional conflict, against which it is easier to defend oneself because it is subject to the principles of international law on armed conflicts. For asymmetric conflicts, it is the opposite. These conflicts make use of unconventional methods and techniques of fighting which are not subject to any regulations and have their own specific *modus operandi*. They include the actions of non-state entities, such as terrorist organisations (most importantly suicide attacks and counter-terrorism), arms and drug trade and information, psychological and economic warfare. Moreover, an asymmetric enemy makes use of the mediagenic nature of its actions to cause general fear and panic, both in the attacked community and society globally. The aim of such actions is to weaken resistance and increase the level of discouragement and social discontent, which is intended to lead to a conclusion of the conflict in accordance with the attacker’s interest.

Due to tendencies related to the blurring of distinctions in the perception of the individual components of conflicts, as well as their diagnoses, analyses and the extent to which conflicts affect the national and international community, the usual doctrinal standards have ceased to be relevant to a certain degree. In this situation, it is necessary to start working on the development of new doctrinal foundations that will make it possible to appropriately respond to the new reality, which includes confrontations with an asymmetric enemy.

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### SPECYFIKA KONFLIKTU ASYMETRYCZNEGO

**Streszczenie.** Artykuł opisuje problematykę konfliktu asymetrycznego widzianego jako zagrożenie bezpieczeństwa państw i społeczności międzynarodowej we współczesnym świecie. W zakresie omawianego zagadnienia wyjaśniono pojęcia: asymetria, wojna asymetryczna, działanie asymetryczne, konflikt asymetryczny, przeciwnik asymetryczny. Ponadto opracowanie zawiera wskazanie specyfiki terenu występowania zagrożeń o charakterze asymetrycznym oraz *modus operandi* konfliktów asymetrycznych. Artykuł zawiera przykłady zagrożeń o charakterze asymetrycznym, wśród których znajduje się zagrożenie terroryzmem (w tym przede wszystkim samobójstwa terrorystyczne), cyberataki, handel bronią, handel narkotykami, wojna psychologiczna, wojna informacyjna i ekonomiczna.

**Słowa kluczowe:** asymetria, wojna asymetryczna, działanie asymetryczne, konflikt asymetryczny, przeciwnik asymetryczny, *modus operandi* konfliktów asymetrycznych

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