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Simons, Anna

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Asymmetries, Anthropology, And War

by Dr Anna Simons

Abstract:

Policy makers continue to want to believe that with just a bit more effort, and greater cross-cultural understanding, their militaries can somehow shape better than they can smash. Many of those who eschew the use of force also believe that disciplines like anthropology really can deliver bloodless solutions. But, at best, this is wishful thinking. As terrible as it may seem to advocate a more honest consideration of force, in actuality nothing is likelier to stand Western militaries in better stead. Ironically, too, nothing less than the proven willingness to use overwhelming force will protect what finesse requires: respect—if not mutual, then at least grudging respect.

Keywords: Asymmetrical Warfare; Counter-Insurgency; Laws of War; Military Psychology

INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War era, the term “asymmetric” has been liberally applied to opponents, threats, weaponry, and warfare. The prevailing presumption seems to be that those who cannot wage war via conventional military means—whether because they are insurgents who do not control the levers of power, or because they belong to a weak state, and/or because they would lose if they tried to confront their opponent(s) head-on—resort to sneakier, ends-justify-the-means methods. The implication, intended or not, is that those who fight asymmetrically do not fight fair. At the same time, because they are so willing to cheat in clever ways, they also prove hard to beat.

It is as if, finally, in the 21st century, David (of David and Goliath fame) has proved himself more than capable of sneaking into slingshot range via a Trojan horse in order to take out the Cyclops' eye. Not to carry this mixed-up Western metaphor too far, but a Cyclops was a leviathan of sorts, and thus somewhat akin to a state. Indisputably, today's non-state actors do possess numerous advantages over states, although many non-Western leaders likewise have advantages over them and us, given their different mores and set points for what they prove

willing to do. Consequently, while one conclusion we can draw is that asymmetry clearly lies in the eye of the beholder, the main thrust of this article is that for all the usual asymmetries we in the West fixate on, we ignore others at our peril.

I begin with a series of asymmetries that, I believe, should trouble us as much, if not more, than those that typically receive attention. Second, I describe how anthropology can be used to better understand some of these challenges, with the caveat that anthropology is not the silver bullet some might wish it were. Third, I sketch some of the pitfalls of current policy approaches which favor finesse over force. Last but not least, I want to suggest that the West may have inadvertently turned “asymmetry” itself into a bigger shibboleth than it deserves to be since, in a definitional sense, no fight has ever been symmetrical, unless fought between mirror images or exact opposites.

ASYMMETRIES

At least six asymmetries currently ensnare us. First, nothing presents a more daunting set of asymmetries than cross-cultural conflict. In a true cross-cultural conflict, neither side considers itself to

be at all like the other. Thus, people fight by different rules, use different methods, and at least one, if not both sides, will usually be willing to inflict all sorts of pain on the enemy. Also, when people see themselves as irreconcilably different, the fuel of conflict tends to be renewable—and continues to replenish itself so long as neither side manages to inflict a permanently game-changing defeat on the other.

A second asymmetry plaguing the West in general, and the United States (US) in particular, is that we do not sufficiently appreciate how little we understand about others versus how much they understand about us. Americans have rendered their society an open book. This not only makes us physically but politically vulnerable. We have a long history of divisiveness over foreign policy. Long wars are especially problematic. Thus, a clever adversary can not only do to us what the North Vietnamese did more than three decades ago, which was to successfully turn us against each other, but a truly clever adversary should be able to purposely embroil us in a war *in order to divide us*—something al-Qaeda likes to claim it is doing via Afghanistan.

For all the usual asymmetries we in the West fixate on, we ignore others at our peril.

A related problem is that Americans are quintessential solipsists; we assume our values are universal human values. Thus, though we often pay lip service to the importance of respecting other cultures, we still do not sufficiently appreciate, let alone respect the fact that many people elsewhere do not want to be “liberated” to become just like us. Yet, we also do not recognize how many other liberations our example has helped effect. For instance, there are very few insurgents or anti-state actors who do not now avail themselves of technology, the media, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and all manner of things we helped invent and once upon a time might have thought we controlled or at least dominate. Any of these inventions can now be turned against us in all sorts of novel ways.



George Patton

This, actually, bleeds into a third set of asymmetries—one that has yielded an almost complete reversal in terms of who can out-manipulate whom in the international arena. While Americans/Westerners may pride ourselves on having finally reached the stage where we favor finesse over game-changing force as *the* means by which to shape the international environment to our advantage, it turns out that finesse is decreasingly likely to achieve the results we seek. This is because people elsewhere are not only also increasingly sophisticated, but are increasingly sophisticated about how to outmaneuver us—particularly when we are in their space.

Worth contemplating is that those running circles around the West and Washington today are not other Westerners. Instead, they are the Omar Bashirs and Hamid Karzais of the world. Meanwhile, the individual who is said to have been the greatest maneuver warfare strategist of the 20th century is no longer George S. Patton or Erwin Rommel, but is instead Paul Kagame, the current and potentially

lifelong President of Rwanda, a likelihood which itself speaks volumes about his political and not just military acumen.¹

This, too, signals a profound shift. Indeed, the breadth and depth of political skill and the longevity of rule across what many in defense policy circles mistakenly refer to as the “arc of instability” represents a fourth asymmetry or paradox. Not only do Western leaders have no good way to force their counterparts in countries like North Korea, Zimbabwe, or Myanmar to do as the West would prefer, but autocrats like these have had no qualms about using force against their own populations. In fact, being cunning about their use of force is how many leaders typically stay in power. Their willingness to do things we will not thus points to a fifth asymmetry: for those who believe it can secure them an edge, force always trumps finesse—whether force is used as a signaling and policing device, as a clear means to a decisive end, or both.

Finally, for the most dangerous asymmetry entrapping us today: too many defense intellectuals in the U.S. (and elsewhere) have bought into the notion that soft warfare and restraint are superior to force, even though neither has proved advantageous in any true cross-cultural conflict, at least one of which the U.S. is currently engaged in.

For instance, consider just *one* of the population-centric binds we have put ourselves in: insurgents, terrorists, and other non-state fighters could not exist, nor could they function, without enabling communities. At the same time, our opponents know that if they situate themselves in the heart of densely populated neighborhoods they present us with a devil's choice. We play into their hands when we attack; we also play into their hands when we do not attack and they remain free. This means they win either way. But—and here comes the sticky part—why? The answer is: thanks to us. Not only do today's terrorists receive shelter, food, and funding from supporters we refuse to consider combatants, but worse, we concur with those who, when they form shadow states, claim their supporters are not just non-combatants, but are also deserving of international recognition and protection.²

How does this make sense? It does not. In fact, if only we could be dispassionate and look at ourselves the way Martians might, we would see how illogical our conventions have become for the world in which we live, although it is not just Martians who should notice how convoluted we are. Anthropology is supposed to lend us the ability to see ourselves the way Martians might, thereby revealing to us the contradictions in our and others' behavior.

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ANTHROPOLOGY – WHAT IT CAN, BUT ALSO CANNOT, DELIVER

Anthropologists typically try to take an inside-out, bottom-up approach. We anthropologists talk to anyone and everyone we can, compare what people say with what they do, and seize on connections, continuities, inconsistencies, and internal contradictions. One of our aims is to compare what people say they do with what they actually do or do not do in order to then account for discrepancies our study subjects may not see, may not want to see, or may not want others to see.

In other words, we anthropologists deal in patterns. Although too few anthropologists have studied the military using anthropological methods, arguably no approach would be more useful for figuring out what makes a military unit tick. For example, say this is what I were asked to do. I would probably start by asking about the unit's legacy and its mission. Next, I would want to see its table of organization. That would clue me in to how power

is supposed to flow. Then, I could begin to probe. Either directly or indirectly I would try to work my way beneath the surface to gauge how decisions are *really* made—who commands respect and authority, who does not, and who in the unit is key to making things happen.

Ideally, I would be iterative from the outset, which means I would tack back and forth between what I can passively absorb through observation and by keeping my ears open, and what I can actively elicit. I would also likely go back and forth between people's presentation of self and what others say about them. To try to be as thorough as possible, I would do this from as many different perspectives as possible, to include soliciting views from outside the unit. That way I would not mistake what might only be individual (or local) idiosyncracies for broader military "culture."

Presumably, with the right access I could apply these same techniques to any military unit anywhere—or to any tribe or group of humans. Anthropology is not rocket science, meaning it is more important to have the right sensibilities than to master any specific set of sequences or techniques. In this regard, anthropology is actually quite a bit like journalism, which likewise digs into the questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how. One difference between journalism and anthropology, however, is that we anthropologists are supposed to be participant-observers which, when it works, means spending so much time with people that they cannot help but ignore us as they go about their daily business. Tellingly, the Pentagon has cleverly adopted embedding as its technique, too, in its efforts to encourage journalists to go native for the military. There are both advantages (e.g. the ability to develop greater understanding and appreciation) and disadvantages (the potential loss of objectivity) to embedding reporters. More often, however, journalists are not granted sufficient time or access and have to instead parachute into trouble zones in order to report authoritatively with little more than veneer expertise. That is not what any anthropologist should do. For instance, just because I did fieldwork in Somalia in 1988-89 does not license me to offer

advice about Iraqis or Afghans—or about anyone else. Cautionary note #1: beware anthropologists who do this.

Cautionary note #2: Like most other social sciences (and all "ologies"), anthropology is designed to strip away the significance of personality, contingency, inadvertence, and interpersonal chemistry—the very essence of all human relationships. This makes anthropological approaches far more reductive than those of historians, who do pay attention to contingency, inadvertence, and the incomparable significance of personality. Thus, while we anthropologists can help make the strange familiar and, by doing cross-cultural work, are better positioned to offer certain kinds of broad cross-cultural insights than many other academics, people's presumptions about what we can do, combined with policy makers' need to have the complex made simple, can also lead some with degrees or training in anthropology to oversell what anthropology alone will never be able to do. In other words, no matter how useful anthropologists may claim to be, there is no substitute for diving deep into local history. Worth remembering is that anthropology offers only one way into context.

Cautionary note #3: since 9/11, anthropologists and others boasting (or seeking) magic decoder rings for culture have made a concerted effort to infuse



Mumbai Train Bombings 2006

America's armed forces with greater cross-cultural awareness training. On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with making soldiers more cross-culturally aware. However, such training should hardly be considered sufficient. In some ways it may even be misleading since, while drinking tea and committing fewer cross-cultural *faux pas* is great for public relations, nothing individual soldiers do is likely to change the locals' views about the real reasons foreign soldiers are in their country. Also, the presumption that establishing rapport cements trust is a Western conceit, and can cause all sorts of problems, especially when those whom soldiers drink tea with later turn out to betray them (which they often will do precisely because their motivations are not those of soldiers). It takes a rare combination of optimism, cynicism, and maturity to be able to successfully thread these needles.

Unfortunately, the American military's preoccupation with trying to make everyone in uniform more cross-culturally astute does not just reflect a classically American mass production approach, it also ignores who signs up for the combat arms (and why). Just as egregiously, it papers over another, different need: namely, the need for ethnographic intelligence (or ethnographic information).

Ethnographic information (EI) refers to all of the "stuff" that ties people together, beyond, beneath, and apart from the state.³ EI refers to all the various ways in which people informally associate with one another. Without paying persistent attention to indigenous means of association—to kinship ties, religious brotherhoods, secret societies, healing cults, clans, triads, and the list goes on—without understanding that these ties are often morally freighted, thereby obligating people to assist each other in unimpeachable ways, and without appreciating how deep such linkages go, we cannot understand how or why states remain vulnerable to being used, subverted, and hollowed out by non-state and anti-state actors. More to the point, there are all sorts of diabolical uses to which adversaries can put networks that are this latent and/or this prone to being hidden in plain sight. Among

our greatest lapses right now in the U.S. is that we have no one in the military or in any of our intelligence agencies assigned to keep a career-long finger on the pulse of indigenous, hijackable networks of this type. Nor do we have anyone who tracks diasporas in any sustained, systematic way.

This is a major oversight, especially since terrorism is more culturally contingent than we often acknowledge. It may even be path dependent: airplanes and airports are favorite targets in the West, trains still loom large in India, and amputations are big in Africa. Also, thresholds for what is considered tolerable may be higher or lower, all depending on the community. Take, for instance, collective punishment. During World War II the Nazis used collective punishment to great effect against the French, whereas it completely enraged and hardened Slovenians. Thus, one conclusion we might draw is that culture clearly matters. Yet, at the same time that culture surely matters, there are still only so many things that can be done to motivate, unify, and organize humans, or split them apart, demoralize, and disorganize them.

So, if culture matters but certain general rules also apply, which should we concentrate on: our differences, or our similarities? Curiously, no one poses this question in any systematic way, though arguably the even more important project would be to first try to determine which differences and which similarities matter most.

GETTING (MORE) REAL ABOUT REALITIES: FORCE VS FINESSE

While there is at least one anthropologist who lists hundreds of human universals, in my view there are actually very few.⁴ There are really only four things all individuals need to consciously do to survive (provided they do not have to worry about physical security): eat, drink, sleep, and excrete. The variety with which we humans perform just these four functions—to include how we sleep—is astounding. One other universal is that we share the same life cycle. All humans who live long enough begin as infants, pass through childhood, enter

adolescence, and become adults. What different societies do with or at each of these stages varies, and this is in part what leads to all sorts of other differences.

In other words, there is a certain biological foundation on which societies construct institutions, around which they devise rules, and from which they then extract meaning and purpose. Sometimes we allow our fixation on discerning patterns at the cultural level to deflect us from this underlying truth. The corollary catch is that over time our social inventions—or conventions—can become as real to us as anything biological. Sometimes even more so.

No wonder we get confused.

For example, here is a thought exercise: Is there anything humans express similarly the world over, recognize, and agree is the same, even when they speak mutually unintelligible languages and live radically different lives? I have posed this question for more than 12 years in classes. Significantly, thus far (still) the only answer that seems to hold is physical courage or physical bravery. The ability to withstand physical pain seems universally recognizable and universally valued. There is nothing else humans express—not happiness, sadness, grief, anger, you name it—that cannot be intentionally or unintentionally misread for something else, which suggests two things. First, there must be something about inflicting pain that transcends culture. Second, virtually all of the emotions and values we think we share, we might or might not share, the implication being that when we presume we know what others mean, we might be right, or we might be wrong.

Throughout the long sweep of human history, being able to inflict visibly decisive pain has always trumped just being smart.

Of course, the even larger implication is that our current approaches to warfare we may find mistaken if they rest, as finesse and population-centric approaches

do, on having to get cross-cultural nuances right. In contrast, say we concentrated instead on avoiding getting the big stuff wrong. Maybe, then, there would be less room for error.

For instance, let us re-consider militaries. It cannot be a coincidence that militaries the world over do many of the same things with their young men that militaries have always done. Nor can it be a coincidence that the same things work. This stands to reason since the bulk raw material is the same—adolescent males. But so is any military's overarching purpose, which is to tangle with other militaries. Given how few ways exist to effectively socialize young men and prepare them to want to do battle, it only makes sense that militaries are more alike than unlike. Of course, a good argument can also be made that militaries are not worth anything if they do not canvas each other for best practices and then adopt those that seem most effective, regardless of the source. This, too, helps homogenize them.

Yet, as easy as it is to adopt and then adapt others' Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs), look at how few structural changes militaries like to make to themselves (or allow civilian authorities to make to them). Arguably, one reason there is so much resistance to deep organizational change has to do with the nature of security dilemmas, since no army would risk fundamentally altering itself until its likeliest adversaries appear ready to do so as well. No doubt, too, the nature of bureaucracy along with entrenched self-interests contributes to preserving the status quo. So do generational differences and/or genuine disagreements over the nature of the future of war.

I do not want to suggest that any of the usual explanations for military conservatism are wrong. But there is at least one additional factor that is seldom, if ever, mentioned or acknowledged, and may be even more obstructionist than any or all of these others, and that is: there has always been a default hierarchy among males, and among adolescents and armed males in particular. You see it in every Service in the U.S. military; there are the combat arms and then combat support, fighter pilots and everyone else.

You see it even in those who claim to have always been oriented toward counterinsurgency (COIN), namely our Special Operations Forces (SOF). Units whose chief mission is unarmed finesse—in the U.S. case, Psychological Operations (Psyops) and Civil Affairs units—have always received less attention and fewer resources than have those who specialize in armed finesse (Green Berets, or U.S. Army Special Forces), while door-kicking direct action units (those who deal in decisive force) garner not only the best resources, but often the best men.⁵

In other words, forget what COIN doctrine suggests the status pyramid should look like, which, in a population-centric warfare world, would mean Psyops and Civil Affairs units would have the most prestige and shooter-killer teams the least; this pyramid has not been, nor is it being, inverted. Nor is anyone talking about reconfiguring Special Operations to do so. Of course, I would also submit that even if someone did try to institutionalize a restructuring of the system this way, with unarmed finesse being granted precedence over armed finesse or armed force, such an inversion would never last for long.⁶ This is because, as so much war literature points out, the ability to be deadly is hopelessly appealing.

Throughout the long sweep of human history, being able to inflict visibly decisive pain has always trumped just being smart. Even in today's kinder, gentler era, most Americans remain fascinated by lethality. Witness television and video games. Ask women. Compile all the evidence and the truism that would emerge would go something like this: the value some people will always be able to find in decisive use of force is that it can be decisive, both literally and figuratively.

IMPLICATIONS

Among other cold, hard realities is the fact that modern militaries have not just evolved to play to a certain set of strengths, but are effective (or not) as a consequence. Consider the irony: when terrorists apply decisive (shockingly decisive) force, how do states counter? By applying yet more decisive force. If we

are being honest, states do this for at least two reasons: those in charge have not yet figured out what works better. Second, they know nothing will work better—not given the realities of human nature, and the fact we are (to borrow from Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox) imperial animals, wired to want to dominate, some more aggressively, brutally, and directly than others.⁷

Recast this slightly, and such a reality about us presents the following dilemma: is it really wise to continue to attempt to remake males and the military, which is what today's soft power approach to warfare requires, in order that democracies be able to deliver nuanced messages and intrude abroad as inoffensively as possible? Or, would we be better off rethinking how to make the most prudent possible use of the givens we have got, in order to intrude as infrequently as possible, but with ruthless decisiveness whenever we do so?

In fact, if only we re-examined most of what we accept today as the “givens” of our existence, we would discover that we are the ones who routinely back ourselves into a corner.

Or, to come back to the non-state actor spectre from a slightly different angle, one of the most notable things about 21st century warfare thus far is the lengths to which Western democracies feel (and are made to feel) they need to go in order to live up to the standards they have set for what is or is not considered appropriate in war. Yet, laudable as this may be, it rests on a dubious foundation since conventions are conventions only because they have been conventions. For capable foes, breaking conventions and defying what is “considered appropriate” is no more difficult than realizing that conventions can be broken. Take Islam and suicide terrorism as an example. For well over a thousand years suicide was not a weapon of war used by Muslims. Now suicide terrorism is at

least a weekly occurrence somewhere. Or, to return us to one of the topics of this article, asymmetry: does not the breaking of conventions itself represent the ultimate asymmetry, especially when it is one we cede away?

To illustrate what I mean, consider the weapon of choice Americans (like the Israelis) now use: “targeted killings.” I hesitate to suggest that our assassinating others helps render political assassinations only a rupture away, particularly since it has long been considered taboo for heads of state to target other heads of state. But we do seem to be headed toward this precipice, especially since non-state actors do not sign up to any such contract.

What will we do once non-state actors realize how much they stand to gain from breaking this taboo and breaching this convention?⁸ Although this actually begs far more loaded questions: why do non-state actors exist at all? Furthermore, who enables them? The answer, of course, is we do—they are a post-modern invented tradition.

In other words, the status we accord non-state actors is another convention; we recognize them, therefore they exist. Otherwise, nothing compels or impels us to grant gangs or groups who refuse to operate within our law the latitude or liberties we do—except for our convictions. In fact, if only we re-examined most of what we accept today as the “givens” of our existence, we would discover that we are the ones who routinely back ourselves into a corner.⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Although not even all Western states are willing to monopolize force within their borders these days, most retain conventional arsenals and the ability to apply unprecedented degrees of overwhelming power should they choose to do so, which is an asymmetry that does still favor them—at least for this historical moment. How long will they retain this edge? The answer to that question may well depend on the extent to which those who seek to retool these militaries prevail.

Here seems to be the catch: provided policy makers continue to want to believe that with just a bit more effort, and greater cross-cultural understanding, their militaries can somehow shape better than they can smash, the more likely they are to embark on campaigns that will remain too fitful, confused, and tepid to be effective—though such efforts will still cost plenty of blood and treasure, not to mention civilian lives. What compounds this problem is that many of those who eschew the use of force also believe that disciplines like anthropology really can deliver bloodless solutions. But, at best, this is wishful thinking. At worst it is wholly misguided—based on anthropology done by those with a bias toward Venus and no direct familiarity with Mars.

In sum, then, as terrible as it may seem to advocate a more honest consideration of force, in actuality nothing is likelier to stand Western militaries in better stead. Ironically, too, nothing less than the proven willingness to use overwhelming force will protect what finesse requires: respect—if not mutual, then at least grudging respect. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. Romeo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil* (Random House Canada, 2003), 188.
2. Think Hezbollah.
3. This is an idea initially developed in Anna Simons and David Tucker, “Improving Human Intelligence in the War on Terrorism: the Need for an Ethnographic Capability,” Report submitted to the Office of Net Assessment (Office of the Secretary of Defense), December 2004. It has also been written about by (among others): Alfred Renzi, “Networks: Terra Incognita and the Case for Ethnographic Intelligence,” *Military Review*, (September-October 2006); Erik Eldridge and Andrew Neboshynsky, *Quantifying Human Terrain*, Masters thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, June 2008; and Varman Chheong and Chad Machiela, *Beyond Lawrence: Ethnographic Intelligence for SOCCOM*, Masters thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, December 2009.
4. Donald Brown, *Human Universals* (McGraw Hill, 1991).

5. This status pyramid was first discussed in Anna Simons and David Tucker, "U.S. Special Operations Forces and the War on Terrorism," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14, no.1 (2003).
6. There are those who argue that U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) have grown too Direct Action-centric; some advocate that SF be split. But not even those who want to see SF return to its Unconventional Warfare (UW) roots discuss the primacy of Civil Affairs or Psychological Operations. Nor do they suggest that SF teams be expanded to include a CA or PsyOp orientation. No whole-of-SOF, let alone whole-of-government approach, broaches status issues—or how to overcome default status differentials.
7. Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, *The Imperial Animal* (Transaction Publishers, 1997).
8. Which some have clearly done, whether in World War I Europe or 20th century India—but curiously, which no one has seriously attempted recently against Western leaders.
9. For one argument for how to do so, see Anna Simons, Joe McGraw & Duane Lauchengco, *The Sovereignty Solution: A Common Sense Approach to Global Security* (Naval Institute Press, forthcoming).



Dr. Anna Simons is a Professor of Defense Analysis at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), joining the faculty in 1998. Prior to teaching at NPS, she was an assistant and then associate professor of anthropology at the University of California at Los Angeles. At NPS, she teaches courses on the anthropology of conflict, military advising, low intensity conflict in Africa, and political anthropology. Dr. Simons is the author of *Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone* and *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces*, and co-author of *The Sovereignty Solution: A Common Sense Approach to Global Security*. She has written extensively about intervention, conflict, and the military from an anthropological perspective for a wide range of publications. Dr. Simons holds an A.B. from Harvard College and a Ph.D. in social anthropology from Harvard University.