



CHAPTER 31

**HOW NON-STATE ACTORS ARE AFFECTING
THE GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION AND WARFARE,
A CASE STUDY OF CONFLICT ZONES
AND HOT SPOTS**

Waqar Hasan KHAN

HOW NON-STATE ACTORS ARE AFFECTING THE GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION AND WARFARE, A CASE STUDY OF CONFLICT ZONES AND HOT SPOTS

Waqar Hasan KHAN

Station Head, Suno News/Pakistan Army

Abstract

Past five years have witnessed a paradigm shift in warfare, where Non-State Actors (NSAs) have challenged the leading powers. Non-State Actors have displayed an ability to leverage limited military power and geostrategic positioning to seriously challenge Western military power in a way that is unprecedented in modern history. Russia and Ukraine have used Private Military Companies like Wagner Group and Georgian Legion. Why militaries are relying on Private Military Companies, is it rebirth of the 'condottiere'; and how it will change the form of warfare? The paper analyses the rise of Non-State Actors in three case studies of Afghanistan, Palestine- Israel conflict and Russia Ukraine War through empirical evidence. In the first part, the paper intends to differentiate between behavior of a rational state and the Non-State actors like Hezbollah, Hamas, Taliban and Houthis, who are not fringe elements but control part of a state or run the state altogether. The second part deals with impact of Non-State Actors on Clausewitz's trinity of Time, Space and Relative Strength (TSR) as well as the notion of Centre of Gravity. The 3rd part deals with how NSAs have challenged conventional and nuclear deterrence. The paper will be built as qualitative research by pitching NSA strategy against existing theories of Deterrence, Nuclear Strategy and Coercive Credibility proffered by André Beaufre, Peter Parret and Thomas Schelling etc. to determine the contours of new form of warfare. In part four, an effort will be made to determine the NSAs use of social media to offer an alternative narrative against western dominated media in the Post Truth environment and how the information warfare is affecting leadership and decision making. Study becomes imperative due to two reasons, deterrence normally works against rational states; when Non-State Actors start holding states and use unconventional strategy to dent conventional and nuclear deterrence of larger powers, how does academia learn from it. And the stereotyping of Taliban and Axis of Resistance as negative entities tends to deny any meaningful debate on Strategy and Tactics applies by these groups against a Super Power, this creates a major gap in study of modern warfare which needs to be bridged through a structured discourse.

Keywords

Non-State Actors, Deterrence, Post Truth, Nuclear Strategy, Axis of Resistance

Introduction

When the Blackwater entered the Iraq war in 2004 as contractors and gradually expanded its operations, no one noticed the role of private militias getting integrated into war effort by the Pentagon or US CENTCOM. The Global War on Terror provided a massive blanket to cover its operations in West Asia and the Greater Middle East. While it provided private security to critical politico-military command and military infrastructure of US led coalition in Iraq War and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Blackwater became instrumental in clandestine operations to dismantle the governance structures of Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, US led coalition started a process of denting the very concept of Westphalian state and ushering in strategic chaos. Iraq, Afghanistan and later on Syria were dismantled through military operations and internal implosion as organized states and their societal fabric was torn apart to give birth to modern Non-State Actors.

Iraq, cohesively held as one unit under Saddam Hussain was systematically dismantled by destruction of a standing Army, police force and its civil bureaucracy including the judicial system. Sectarian undercurrents and ethnic divisions got accentuated and it was virtually left to the tribal and sectarian forces to form their respective zones of influence. The imbalance created by the Iraq war resulted in violent regime change and creation of a new elite in three major zones, Southern Iraq, Central and Western Iraq and Northern Iraq. The proxy war trisected the state and ushered in the domination of private militias and terror groups.

While Iraq was being imploded internally, Syrian civil War erupted in 2011, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) aka Daish quickly rose and expanded its zone of influence in Syria as well as Iraq. Thus, a new and more ruthless entity occupied a wide swath of territory, both in Iraq and Syria, from its western extremity line of Kobane, Palmyra and Rutba to its eastern extremity line of Mosul, Tikrit and Ramadi. It was widely projected that ISIL would establish a new Khilafat in the entire Middle East and further expand its influence in West Asia and even North Africa. ISIL also changed its name to Islamic State to give her the representation of the entire Islamic World with its sub chapters such as ISIL, ISKP (Islamic State of Khurasan Province) covering Afghanistan, part of Central Asia and entire South Asia, Islamic State of the Maghreb, Islamic State of Yemen and Arabian Peninsula and Islamic State of Habash covering Central and Eastern Africa.

Gradually, IS recruitment became international, with cadres being drawn from all across the Islamic World as well as new converts from North America, Europe and Australia. Whosoever designed the IS had three major objectives, dismantle the Westphalian modelled states of Islamic World, project a concocted and ruthless version of Islam and pitch the people against their ruling elite. All combined, it was based on creation of Non-State Actors in different zones and geographical units.

Feeling the heat, the Muslim Countries lying on the outer periphery of ISIS controlled zone as well as major powers like Russian Federation started a push back to preserve their state interests and geographical sovereignty, thus a long period of proxy war started in 2nd decade of twenty first century, which has been going on till today. The prominent Non-State Actors, which are also part of the research in this paper, include Houthis in Yemen, Hamas and Hezbollah in Occupied Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon and Taliban in Afghanistan.

While grouping different political resistance groups and even Private Military Companies into one basket of Non-State Actors, there is a need to study existing literature, as different countries and alliances define them differently. Non-State Actors is a very broad term and enough literature is available to support the definition of non-state actors as accrued in the paper. Afghan Taliban, Hamas, Houthis, Hezbollah, Georgian Legion and PMC Wagner have evolved over decades. For example, Taliban before coming to power in 2021, were Non-State Actors and have evolved recently to be a ruling entity, however international community has not formally recognized their government and they essentially remain an informal ruling entity.

Non-state actors are generally defined as entities that participate in or act on international relations and have enough power to exert influence and effect change despite the fact that they are not members of established state institutions. Non-state actors refer to international organizations, corporations, non-governmental organizations, de facto regimes, trade associations, transnational corporations, terrorist groups, and transnational criminal organizations (Wagner, 2009).

NSAs can be unarmed or armed, and the concept of NSAs grows to encompass entities and groups that control areas or not. Despite certain similarities, NSAs are extremely diverse. Some may have clearly stated political agendas, while others may not. Some may govern territory and have administrative structures that are parallel to or replace those of the state, whereas others have loose command structures and little authority over members. Some fight in rural areas using guerilla tactics, while others are primarily urban. Some focus on striking military objectives, while others attack people for strategic reasons (DCAF & Geneva Call, 2015).

While discussing specific cases like Hezbollah and Taliban, it is interesting to note the debate in international security community. Shaikh et al (2018) in the paper on Hezbollah stated that “Hezbollah is the world’s most heavily armed non-state actor.”

Robinson (2024) has highlighted that Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political party and militant group based in Lebanon, where its extensive security apparatus, political organization, and social services network have fostered its reputation as “a state within a state.”

Bellal et al. (2011) defined the Taliban as Armed Non-State Actors in a research study published in the International Review of the Red Cross. According to Bellal et al, critics are divided on the extent and structure of ANSAs in Afghanistan, as well as the nature of their relationships. From their original zone of influence in south-western Afghanistan, they swiftly expanded their dominance over the rest of the country. They took control of Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul, in September 1996, and over 90% of the country by 1998.

After their ouster from power in 2002, the Taliban became a very strong-Armed Non-State Actor and launched their military campaign against US led NATO forces, finally affecting the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

These Non-State Actors either control complete states (Taliban in Afghanistan) or partially hold important geographical zones (Houthis in Yemen, Hamas in Occupied Palestine, Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon and Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq). These entities have organized and well-equipped military forces as well as political hierarchy of governance and have continued to defy Israel and the Western Powers in Middle East and West Asia.

Why Private Military Companies are defined as Non-State Actors is because of different interpretations in the international system and the fact that one group’s rebel may be other group’s hero. More recently the US declared Wagner Group as Transnational Criminal Organization; Ross et al (2023) quoted that US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby eluded why the Treasury Department designated the private military company (PMC) Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization (TCO). In recent years, Western states and organizations have considered a variety of legal methods against Wagner, including terrorism designations and sanctions for his backing of separatist troops in Ukraine. The TCO designation is thus the most recent step in a multifaceted sanctioning approach aimed at countering the PMC’s critical and often ruthless role in furthering Russian state goals abroad.

More detailed discourse on Wagner Group can be found in the works of Lauder (2024) in his article *State, non-state, or chimera? The rise and fall of the Wagner Group and recommendations for countering Russia’s employment of complex proxy networks.*

Another important aspect in the research is that how ‘Post Truth’ era is affecting the conduct of warfare and perception management. Naureen (2019) has highlighted the importance of this aspect, referring to its definition by Cambridge Dictionary, she opines that the Post-Truth era and the Great Disruption are the new normal in the twenty-first century.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), the term “post truth” refers to a scenario in which individuals are more likely to accept an argument based on their feelings and opinions than on facts. Post-truth politics is a political culture in which debate is dominated by emotional appeals unrelated to policy details, and factual rebuttals are ignored through repeated declaration of insignificant punch lines. Post truth varies from traditional fact contesting and falsification by putting facts and expert judgments second, with a greater emphasis on emotional appeals.

Study becomes imperative due to two reasons, deterrence normally works against rational states; when Non-State Actors start holding states and use unconventional strategy to dent conventional and nuclear deterrence of larger powers, how does academia learn from it. And the stereotyping of Taliban and Axis of Resistance as negative entities tends to deny any meaningful debate on Strategy and Tactics applies by these groups against a Super Power, this creates a major gap in study of modern warfare which needs to be bridged through a structured discourse.

Behavior of Non-Fringe ‘Non-State Actors’ holding States or Part of the State vis a vis Rational States.

Character of the Non-State Actors under discussion

It may be difficult to define the behavior of Non-State Actors under discussion as a monolith as they control and operate different geographical zones and have distinct psychosocial and strategic environment affecting their decision-making process, there are commonalities in these groups which can help in formulating minimum common denominators.

All of these groups have fought their way through against hostile powers within and without and have maintained political control over states or part of the states. They have basic structure of governance and have established links with states on their periphery and run politico diplomatic offices which are formally or informally recognized by their supporting states. These entities have organized militaries or militias, which are suitably structured to not only govern and police internally but also defend their areas of control militarily. In case of Taliban in Afghanistan, they have established diplomatic missions in some important countries, trade with regional countries and have an evolving judicial system. China, Pakistan, Iran and some Central Asian countries maintain regular social, trade and commerce relations with Afghan Taliban due to number of factors including historic, cultural and geo-political compulsions.

All of these groups have ideological moorings, which gives them extensive leverage to govern people under their control and follow aggressive foreign and diplomatic policies. Since militancy forms the core of their political structure, they are able to maintain motivated militias or militaries to maintain security within and aggressively take on any aggressor. Although the politico-military command structure is hierarchical, these groups operate in more networked, decentralized and nonlinear fashion, which makes it challenging for any aggressor to define their politico-military Centre of Gravity, this factor becomes crucial when pitched against the Clausewitz’ notion of Centre of Gravity; and this is one of the main reasons they are able to parry any form of conventional or nuclear deterrence.

They have Faith in their Cause, which is a derivative of these groups having ideological moorings, this amorphous factor often become critical, whenever a strong military power challenges these groups through extensive and overbearing use of military force. According to (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2023) Israeli offensive action against Gaza had delivered ammunition equal to two Hiroshima size of Nuclear bombs on the narrow strip by end November 2023. This open genocide has not been able to break the will of Hamas or the people of Palestine.

Similarly, when President Trump was negotiating with the Taliban and was about to invite their leadership to Camp David, there was an attack on US service men, (Trump, 2019) remarked, “If they cannot agree to a ceasefire during these very important peace talks, and would even kill 12 innocent people, then they probably don’t have the power to negotiate a meaningful agreement anyway. How many more decades are they willing to fight”.

About the character of Hezbollah, Hamas and Houthis, a detailed discourse can be found in the book written by Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei with the title 'Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars'. Although written in a negative tone and with an element of propaganda, the book throws some light on the ideological and structural moorings of these groups and how they have evolved from rag tag forces and small hit and run militias into cohesive, agile and well-structured Non-State Actors, who have developed the prowess and wherewithal defying major powers like the US, her Allies and the State of Israel and written new chapters in modern warfare.

Seliktar and Rezaei (2020) have highlighted that Iran's employment of proxies has been a resounding success in spreading its revolution and establishing the ideology, also known as the Axis of Resistance, throughout the Middle East, the Gulf States, and Yemen. With limited conventional resources, the regime has expanded its search for political power across the Middle East in ways that few could have expected in 1979.

Hezbollah was strengthened and equipped as the flagship of axis of resistance and has achieved a military capability to not only control Southern Lebanon but also pose as a major threat to the State of Israel from the north. Combined with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Iran has expanded its influence in the periphery of Israel and created a major threat along the Southern border of Israel (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020). The Revolutionary Guards played a major role in protecting the Syrian government and reassuring Bashar Assad. Hezbollah's sub branch in Iraq, Kataib Hezbollah, has also increased Iranian influence in Iraq.

Seliktar and Rezaei (2020) have pointed out that Houthis rise to pre-eminence after their conflict with Oil rich Kingdoms have extended Iranian influence along the southern region of Arabian Peninsula, the Houthis have become a force to reckon with and they have also played the role of a disruptive power and tool of Anti-Access, Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy, especially in the Red Sea and the choke point of the Bab al-Mandab Straits. While it is difficult to give single explanation for the remarkable success of the strategic proxy project, apparently it is a combination of several Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC) winning strategies. The ability of the Axis of Resistance to merge with civilian population and adopt a nonlinear military strategy and dispersion has greatly reduced the deterrence capacity of state actors who may be restrained by the international humanitarian law of proportionality. While Seliktar and Rezaei (2020) have further argued that "well-known, state actors would refrain from targeting a lawful military objective if the attack can be expected to result in unnecessary civilian harm" (p. 236), the conduct of Global War on Terror in past three decades by the US led coalition and recent Israeli offensive against innocent Palestinians tell a very different story.

Character of Rational State Actors

In contrast to Non-State actors, the Rational State Actors and their politico-military leadership have to be accountable for domestic and internal laws and conventions. The structured system of governance and national security also binds them into more predictable and rational behavior. Although rational state actors have displayed irrational decision making and apathy to loss of human life in wars and conflicts, US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Israeli genocide of Palestinians in post 7th October conflict with Hamas being cases in point, by and large the rational state actors have to operate within some bonds of humanitarian and international laws and convention.

Recent examples of Indo Pakistan air skirmish in February 2019, which could have resulted into expansion of the conflict, both sides exercised restraint and India despite having advantage of a larger conventional military force, had to back down as a steep climb up the escalation ladder could have resulted into nuclear posturing and loss of control on the conflict itself. Similarly, there was a short exchange of missiles, drones and rockets between Pakistan and Iran and both sides swiftly de-escalated the conflict, as it could have damaged their strategic interests beyond any reasonable calculation.

Impact of Non-State Actors on Clausewitz's Notion of Centre of Gravity, Trinity of War and Time, Space and Relative Strength (TSR)

Has the Notion of Centre of Gravity become Questionable?

The academic literature on Clausewitz and his relevance in 21st Century Asymmetric warfare suggests that we should apply his notions to check the effects of Non-State Actors in transformation of warfare. Clausewitz is an essential theorist whose theories and notions are being discussed in military institutions like US Army War College, National Defence University, Pakistan, National Defence University India and host of other countries. Non-State Actors have been and are involved in wars and conflicts against conventional military forces, like Georgian Legion against Russia in Ukraine, PMC Wagner group against NATO backed Ukrainian forces and Hezbollah and Hamas against the State of Israel. Similarly, Taliban have fought US led NATO in Afghanistan. Since conventional military forces still apply Clausewitz and other sages of Military Strategy in military operations and wars, it becomes essential to study the impact of Non-State Actors on the notions and theories being followed by conventional militaries. There is also enough literature where the authors have tried to study the impact of Non-State Actors on Clausewitz' notions.

Kelly (2006) had conducted pioneering research on the notion of Center of Gravity in the asymmetric environment and its application against armed Non-State Actors and terrorist organizations. According to Kelly (2006), the concept of a Center of Gravity (COG) in warfare, first introduced by Carl von Clausewitz in the 1820s, is now a component of numerous military doctrines used by strategists to build war-winning plans. Over the last 25 years, the concept has been increasingly essential in US military doctrine. The world has evolved tremendously since the inception of COG. And, in today's asymmetric world, where non-state actors use novel methods, applying the COG concept is getting more difficult.

Clausewitz's notion of the Center of Gravity is regarded vital when discussing the transformation of warfare, which is the paper's main focus. The US Army War College offers a comprehensive module on the essence and character of war via the theoretical prism of the famous Prussian philosopher of war, Carl von Clausewitz. The block also covers a broader range of six causes of conflict. At the conclusion of this block, the student should be able to understand the nature vs character of war, the fundamentals of strategic theory, the applications of history, key concepts from international relations theory and geopolitics, and the causes of war that influence strategy creation and execution. (US Army War College, 2018).

More lately, a discussion in military institutions about the relevance of Clausewitz theories has gained traction. Dickson (2022) has highlighted that the US military should read Clausewitz and approach war with the steadfastness of a genuine believer: while the character of war varies over time, its nature stays consistent. Clausewitz will become the foundation for all military preparedness. Everyone will have a Clausewitz phrase ready to back up their operational strategy and war plans. Floris (2012) underlined the need of studying Clausewitz while dealing with non-state actors, as well as how the legendary military genius remained relevant in the twenty-first century.

The Clausewitz' notion of Centre of Gravity in War is also becoming questionable, especially when a modern structured military power confronts the Non-State Actor partially or wholly holding a state or a geographical area. The notion of Centre of Gravity still forms a basic brick or foundation of war or military operation. Although there has been extensive debate on application of Clausewitz notion of Centre of Gravity in nonlinear warfare, his theory is still held as the bedrock of any Military Strategy. There is definitely more research required to apply or redefine the notion, when it comes to Non-State Actors in 3rd decade of the 21st Century, especially in the Post Truth environment.

Clausewitz had identified Centre of Gravity being the fulcrum or mass on which a Political or Military System relies to draw strength and maintains balance, if targeted and degraded or destroyed the whole system would collapse. In case of Strong state, it could be the Capital of the state or the politico military command center. In case of a conventional military force, it could be the Strategic Reserve, in case of a political or ideological movement it could be the core of Political decision making, in case of an alliance it could be largest partner (like US in NATO).

Hypothetically analyzing the application of the concept of Centre of Gravity on the Houthis and their Ansarullah force, how would a military power like US and its allies approach them in military confrontation: Is it possible to march onto the capital Sanna and cause a collapse of Houthi system of forces or governance? How much force would be required in how much time and what spaces have to be occupied within the Houthis controlled area to cause their collapse? Thus, the interplay of Time, Space and Relative Strength has to be orchestrated to develop a military maneuver. In case it is presumed that Houthis politico-military command structure is the Centre of Gravity, can it be destroyed through a military operation and at what cost in terms of Time, Space and Relative strength. What do we do when dealing with a hierarchical command structured at strategic level which is highly decentralized at tactical level and its military component operating into small, nonlinear and autonomous groups merged with the civilian population? In case it is presumed that Houthi Centre of Gravity lies in the strong strategic linkage with Islamic Republic of Iran and IRGC, can Iran be attacked to defeat the Houthis? And if the Houthis are part of a larger Axis of Resistance spread over four focal points, Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq, and who tend to operate in difference time and space zones like a disorganized orchestra, how does anyone find the real Centre of Gravity of this force.

Clausewitz' Trinity of War

As far as Clausewitz' Trinity of War is concerned, it has drawn different interpretations and arguments, As stated by (Singh, 2021),

in formulating the basic trinity, Clausewitz simply wanted to argue that war is made up of three central elements, or dominant tendencies. War, is 'comprised of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity (three again), which are to be regarded as a blind natural force. These elements are variously condensed into short-hand versions such as 'passion, chance, and politics. Each tendency; passion, chance, and policy/politics of the trinity is (mainly) manifested in a corresponding subject within society: respectively, the people, the army, and the government.

More elaborate and profound interpretation has been done by (Brassford, 2007), who elaborates that

War is more than a mere chameleon, because it changes its nature to some extent in each concrete case. It is also, however, when it is regarded as a whole and in relation to the tendencies that dominate within it, a fascinating trinity—composed of:

1. primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force;
2. the play of chance and probability, within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and
3. its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to pure reason. The first of these three aspects concerns more the people; the second, more the commander and his army; the third, more the government. The passions that are to blaze up in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope that the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone. (p.77)

While applying it to Non-State Actors under discussion, Clausewitz' Trinity faces some major challenges, especially of the element of subordination and it becoming an instrument of policy as well as development of political aim and government. Non-State Actors, generally, combine the politico-military leadership in their hierarchical structure and become more dictatorial, like Taliban and Hezbollah. Despite having consultative bodies or 'Shooras', the decision making is done by a select core group under the auspices of a Supreme leader or Ameer.

Redundancy of Clausewitz in Post Westphalian State, an Irony and Insult.

Some of the Western scholars of Policy and Military strategy had already started discarding Clausewitz at the very start of 21st century, ironically the post-Cold War emergence of United States as the Hyper Power and Global War on Terror became the main instrument of dismantling of the Westphalian state, at least in the Islamic World. Strachan (2007) alludes to

how Colin Powell, who read Clausewitz while at the US National War College maintained the Clausewitzian philosophy in use of military power. Powell was the military adviser to the Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who in 1984 enunciated the so-called 'Weinberger doctrine', setting out the terms on which the United States would henceforth use military force. In 1992, when Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Powell articulated his own doctrine, replete—as the Weinberger doctrine had been—with Clausewitzian phraseology. (p. 34)

Strachan (2007) goes on to argue that

the trouble for US policymakers between 1990 and 2003, from the end of the Cold War to the invasion of Iraq, was that many of the world's problems were not well adapted to Powell's conceptual framework. Few if any of the conflicts which occurred in the Balkans, the Middle East, or Africa justified the application of overwhelming military force, and even fewer were likely to deliver clear outcomes. The Powell doctrine, however much it appealed within the army, seemed to be a constraint on American flexibility and responsiveness, a tool inappropriate to what international relations theorists described as a post-Westphalian world. They argued that an era of national sovereignty, inaugurated in Europe in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia, had dissolved after the end of the Cold War, in a welter of non-state actors, guerrillas, terrorists, and criminals, who thrived in failed and rogue states, and tended to use war for objects that were not the pursuit of policy by other means. Powell was not the only one who was passé; so too was Clausewitz. (p. 34)

The argument by Strachan and many exponents of Post Westphalian state seems ironic and insult to lives of millions who either perished in the devastating War on Terror or had to suffer the ordeal of dislocation and violent regime change as result of US intervention, 90% of which took place in Middle East and West Asia. Anyways, the birth of organized Non-State Actors was a natural outcome of this disruption. More Ironic is the fact that the Western world was spared from the specter of Post Westphalian state disruption rather it formed monoliths like European Union and strengthened NATO, only part of Islamic World transited and fragmented into a post Westphalian state domain. The so called "welter of non-state actors, guerrillas, terrorists, and criminals, who thrived in failed and rogue states" (Strachan, 2007, p. 34), was actually a creation of the Western democracies' experiment under the garb of Global War on Terror.

Why Major Powers' Nuclear and Conventional capability has failed to Deter Non-State Actors?

The US led coalition in the Middle East with world's most organized and sophisticated military machine backed up by nuclear weapons has not been able to effectively deter the Axis of Resistance and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Why? Although it may be difficult to answer the question in black and white, some of the factors discussed in part 2 of the paper may have an answer.

Character of the Non-State Actor Defies Deterrence

The amorphous and Non-Linear character of the NSAs appear to be one major factor, which has puzzled the conventional military minds of major powers, wielding Nucs and conventional military forces in the region. Again, referring to Seliktar and Rezaei's research on how Iran built the NSAs over a period of three decades and ingrained the ideology in their cadres, may have some clues to the answer. The investment in time and effort has built a war machine that is agile and responsive and has inherent capability to evolve over a period of time. In case of Taliban or their predecessors, they had the distinct honor of defeating two super powers within a span of four decades and their evolution from a well-structured militia to a de-facto Emirate, which now controls Afghanistan, has been phenomenal.

Demographics of Western Hegemonic Powers cannot Sustain Long Wars thus Dilutes the Forces in Time rather than Space. Deterrence has Time Limit

Current global demographic trends are unprecedented in modern history, while in the past the weak and strong states and empires generally grew in population at almost the same pace, 21st century has witnessed something very different. Populations are expanding in the global South, especially in South Asia, Middle East and Africa, where as it is rapidly declining in the Developed

world. This trend is creating a salutary effect on warfare, as warfare is heavily dependent upon the human resource and despite advancement in Science and Technology and talk of Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), human factor remains the decisive factor in modern warfare.

This brings discussion to the notion of Dilution of forces in Time and Space and how does it affect modern warfare, this also leads one to draw certain conclusions on how Non-State Actors are using this notion in military strategy. It is widely quoted that Mullah Umar, the Supreme Leader of Taliban in Afghanistan had said about American Occupation of Afghanistan, “You have the watches, we have the Time”. The quote has been referred at many places, some researchers suggesting that it is an old Afghan Proverb, however other suggest that this was used by Taliban and their leadership.

Feroz (2019), while discussing the issue of the long war states that ;out of both forces, the Taliban have the long wind while the Americans are determined to leave one day, like all the others who entered Afghanistan in previous decades or centuries. It brings to mind the old adage, “You have the watches, we have the time,” – an Afghan proverb, but some Western analysts have credited it to the Taliban.

Some veterans in US military who either served in Afghanistan or were witness to US in intervention in Afghanistan suggest that it was Mullah Umar who stated about ‘watches and time’. DeVillafranca (2009) echoed the sentiment of the stretched war: “For some time now, our trajectory and strategy in Afghanistan have been flat.” We are not losing or winning. We are in an operational deadlock in which progress on governance, rebuilding, and economic development, the foundation of our state-building strategy is decreasing while the need for security and increased military power is increasing.

DeVillafranca (2009) goes on to emphasize that the situation is problematic, given the American cultural need to move on to new challenges. Pakistanis and Afghans are not only aware of this propensity, but also recall it, making our claims of constancy meaningless. Even Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader deposed by the United States in 2001, recognizes the importance of patience. “Americans have all the watches,” he famously stated, “but we have all the time.”

How effective is the strategy can be gleaned from the September 7, 2019 tweet by then US President, Donald Trump, while negotiating with the Taliban and inviting them to Camp David felt exhausted, “If they cannot agree to a ceasefire during these very important peace talks, and would even kill 12 innocent people, then they probably don’t have the power to negotiate a meaningful agreement anyway. How many more decades are they willing to fight?”.

In order to understand the notion of dilution of forces in time, a comparison between fight against the Non-State Actors and Operation Barbarossa can be drawn. My own conclusions about Operation Barbarossa as discussed in various discussions at National Defence University, Islamabad and classified Wargames suggest that although Russians suffered serious losses in earlier part of execution of Operation Barbarossa, one of the main reasons for German defeat was her inability to hold such a vast area.

Operation Barbarossa under Hitler’s Directive 21 was launched by Nazi Germany with a hope that its forces would wrap up the White Russia within a short campaign of five months and force a Soviet Union surrender, paving way for Lebensraum. While initially Operation Barbarossa achieved success, and German forces reached as close as Khimki, west of Moscow, the vastness of Russian land space started impacting the attacking forces. This combined with the resilient fight by the Red Army and Russian people turned the tide and Stalin’s forces marched into the Reichstag on 2nd May 1945. Thus Nazi German forces were diluted in space and could not hold the entire front from Baltic to Black Sea. A detailed account of Operation Barbarossa is available in literature across the world; UK Imperial War Museum analysis on the subject is a short but comprehensive treatise which confirms the conclusions drawn by the author as well. (Imperial War Museum, n. d.)

If one looks at the scale of the offensive, available technology and Wehrmacht's military capability vis a vis the Soviet forces, there was a kind of parity that existed. On the eve of launching of Operation Barbarossa, Germany had fielded 145 Divisions (including 19 Armoured) vs Red Army, which had 178 Divisions (including 40 Armoured and Motorized). Similarly, both belligerents had a parity in Air power (US Department of Army, 1955).

Although German rapid advance in initial stages of Barbarossa was due to better strategy and tactics, the offensive had started reaching its limits by end of the year 1941. Practically the vast space of Russian land mass had started diluting the concentration of German Army and it became overstretched.

In case of US led NATO's occupation of Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom and beyond (2001-2021), the war machine fielded within a small strategic space of Afghanistan was proportionately very large and modern as compared to Taliban rag tag militia. US CENTCOM and NATO had complete freedom of action on land, air and sea and they could effectively utilize the bases in Middle East and West Asia to destroy Taliban resistance and maintain the US occupation. The military power of the coalition and high technology gave it an unprecedented ratio of 1:100 vis a vis Taliban. Even in information domain, the Western Media dominated the battle of narrative and Taliban had no platforms to put their perspective or point of view.

Being a close watcher of the War in Afghanistan and having remained part of higher military decision making process between 2009 to 2020, I feel that Taliban strategy brought in a new notion of Strategy, diluting the opponent forces in time, instead of space. Comparing it with Operation Barbarossa where almost 5 million Russian forces stretched German Military force for three years in a space of 900,000 Sq miles, the Taliban stretched the US-NATO forces within a small space of 250,000 square miles for 20 years.

The calculation of spaces occupied by Germany in Soviet Union and US/NATO in Afghanistan have been worked by the author through a study of war maps. The spaces captured and occupied by Germany in Soviet Union, including the maritime areas of Black Sea and Baltic Sea come to approximately 900,000 sq miles. Afghanistan's geographical area is approximately 250000 sq miles. Inflab (2015) and World Atlas may be consulted for reference.

Although it may appear to be simplification of both the wars and but it has substantial evidence that the trinity of Time, Space and Relative Strength was used in a totally unconventional way by the Taliban to stretch and tire the US led coalition and force their withdrawal.

Similarly, the Axis of resistance comprising Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis and Kataib Hezbollah has evolved over a period of four decades, moored in their ideology and with a faith in their cause, this coalition has not only grown but also displayed innovation in tactics and strategy.

Play of Demographic Factor in Russia-Ukraine War and the rise of Private Military Companies

Iraq war, Syrian civil war and the ongoing Russia Ukraine war have brought forth the employment of Private Military Companies and contractors. Not much information was available on these private military contractors and companies before the name Blackwater emerged in West Asia and the Middle East. Gradually, the security community across the world came to know about their existence and operations in second decade of 21st century.

Beyond the daily cyclones of rhetoric and fake news spread across X (Twitter), Telegram, Instagram and YouTube, the existence of Private Military Companies/Contractors and militias like Wagner Group, the Georgian Legion, G4S and, Black Water has been there on ground for a considerable amount of time.

I had co-authored a paper with Adeela Naureen which was published in a Pakistani newspaper, it gave some insight into composition of Georgian Legion, (Naureen & Khan, 2023) formed by Georgian mercenaries in 2014, the legion has morphed into nearly a brigade-size force.

Its composition is intriguing as you find Indian, Israeli, American, Georgian, Ukrainian, British, German and even Taiwanese mercenaries forming part of this outfit, which has fought Russian forces in Donbass and east of Dnieper River. The legion specializes in hit and run tactics, has reasonably good firepower and is most probably funded by western intelligence agencies and the Government of Ukraine". Important point to note is that these mercenary groups and private military companies draw recruits from across the world; definitely the cadres have no affiliation with a particular nation or state but are mainly drawn into conflict zones because of monetary benefits.

Yüksel (2023) has done a comprehensive analysis of structure and motivation for raising of some of the leading Private Military Companies and Contractors in TRT World Research Centre. These entities are being employed by major powers due to number of reasons, which include Cost effectiveness, Flexibility, Specialized Knowledge and Supplementing Existing Forces. While the major powers have given different names and forms to these quasi mercenaries to avoid the radar of Geneva Convention of 1949, in essence these remain as modern 'condottiere'.

One of the major factors driving major powers to raise, hold and integrate these private Military Companies is the Demographics. Russia Ukraine War has clearly demonstrated that both sides have suffered huge losses and, especially Ukraine, which according to various estimates has lost frontline soldiers and officers to a tune of half a million (killed and injured). Similarly, Russian losses run into tens of thousands. The war has already stretched into its third year, with no end in sight. While soldiers fighting on the frontline are essential, there is a huge requirement to run the logistic train, which has already stretched US and NATO system to its limits. Even stocks of basic ammunitions like Artillery shells and Mortar rounds have seen a sharp depletion, the ability of the US Defense Industrial Complex and its allies have found it hard to keep the Ukrainian frontlines well stocked with weapons and ammunitions. Inadequate Workforce has been recognized as a major challenge to US defense production in the National Defense Industrial Strategy issued by the Department of Defense in 2023. Department of Defence (2023) has stated that "the labor market lacks the required number of skilled workers to meet defense production demand while driving innovation at all levels. This shortfall is becoming exacerbated as baby boomers retire, and younger generations show less interest in manufacturing and engineering careers". (p.10)

The factors discussed above clearly point to the pitfalls of demographic imbalance and how the major Western powers are being affected in conduct of wars and military operations. Thus, Private Military Companies occupying centre stage in ongoing and future wars are a necessity rather than a matter of choice.

Defining Victory in Post Truth Era, the Case of Russia Ukraine War

For many in South Asia, the appearance of Wagner Group on the scene during battle for Bakhmut and the antics of the (late) Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin came as a surprise. The phantasmagoria of war played into millions of drawing rooms across the world turned the miseries of soldiers in the frozen plains of Ukraine into a harsh but tragic infotainment. While the Western social media turned the Wagner Group into a circus of musicians under the auspices of Putin's Buttler, the Russian social media labeled the group as an Orchestra and taunted the Ukrainian and NATO high command that they were losing battles to a bunch of musicians using forks and knives to capture fortresses of Bakhmut and adjoining areas.

Ukraine has lost almost one fifth of its real estate and 80% of its seaboard, after loss of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, industrial hub of Donbas was also lost in initial phases of the war, the total cost of war suffered by Ukraine may not be easy to calculate, but a conservative estimate puts it at 1.5 trillion dollars. But if one analyses the media and statements of the policy makers of both sides, it appears that both sides are winning. Who is losing this war? This is the biggest question of our times; how do you define the notion of Victory in a post truth environment?

There is a serious effort required to address the question, which should form the basis of policy and strategy in conduct of war. After all, war being an instrument of policy, should be able to help the belligerents achieve their ends and objectives.

The Strategy and Tactics of NSAs, Houthis as a Case Study

Although Houthis are supported by Iranian advisors through tactical and logistic support, a brief review of their strategy is important to understand how they are shaping the modern warfare.

Shaping the Strategic Environment

Traditionally the shaping of strategic environment was considered to be the preview of larger or Super powers. In 21st Century, it has been mostly shaped by the US or US led coalitions formed in different regions. Starting from US war against Iraq, Afghanistan and now supporting Ukraine against Russian Federation, US has used its hard power to affect change to safeguard its vital interests. Houthis have displayed a new norm in modern times by initially tiring the Middle Eastern oil rich states and creating a de-facto legitimacy for their control of major part of Urban Yemen and later taking on the Israeli backers in the West by creating a new conflict zone around Bab al Mandab and the Red Sea, even extending their sphere of influence to Indian ocean. This cannot be incidental but appears to be part of a well thought out Strategic process. Their maritime strategy is woven around following contours:

- a. Sea denial in intervals suited to their selected time and space, even without declaring it.
- b. Embedded social media teams with their daring assault and capturing of large maritime vessels, playing on the sensitivities of Islamic World and the Arab world as well as Global South. Latest being offering Eid Prayers on the deck of Galaxy Leader and putting it on their YouTube Channel with the title “From captured UK ship, Yemenis salute Palestinians on Eid al-Fitr”. (Al Mayadeen, 2024)
- c. Use Swarm Warfare through a combination of small boats, Fidayeen squads, drones, missiles and even ground based rocket systems to saturate the response by Western navies, especially exploiting the choke point of Bab al Mandab.

The above conclusions have been drawn by me through study of Middle East Conflict since 7th October. The author was doing a program with SUNO TV channels where regular analysis of the conflict was discussed and essentially remains to be my own analysis.

Economic Warfare by Threatening Maritime Trade

Houthis have resorted to attacking Israeli linked commercial shipping and increasing the cost of trade. They have also disrupted global communications by cutting submarine cables and affecting Internet of targeted states. Interestingly, economic warfare, especially related to maritime trade is nothing new, the battle of Atlantic in WW2 saw extensive use of this warfare, similarly recent scuttling of Nord Stream by unknown miscreants is an example of how vulnerable maritime infrastructure can be targeted to achieve the objectives of modern warfare. As reported by (Bloomberg, 2024)

The Houthis are demonstrating in real time just how target-rich developed nations are. Wealthy, complex societies such as the US, which had a per capita gross domestic product above \$76,000 at the end of last year, have a lot more to attack (and lose) than a nation such as Yemen, with per capita GDP of \$650. In a globalized economy, much of the infrastructure supporting all that wealth creation is offshore. So, when the Houthis disrupt the roughly 12 per cent of global shipping that passes through the Bab al-Mandab strait between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, it impacts consumers in Europe and manufacturers in Asia, but not Yemen. If oil tankers have to shift to longer, more expensive routes than the Suez Canal, nudging up the price of gasoline at US pumps, the Houthis will be much less affected. The same goes for attacking the dozen or more international submarine data cables that run through the same strait. Meanwhile, if the Houthis kill US troops or citizens, that’s a political problem for the Biden administration. If the US kills Houthi civilians, that’s a political boon for the Houthis— as Hamas has proved in Gaza. It still isn’t clear how the three Red Sea cables were damaged. The Ministry of Telecommunications in Sana’a has denied Houthi involvement. (Bloomberg, 2024)

Social Media; Apathy to Serious Discourse and Effects on Notion of Victory

Although this aspect requires a complete and independent research by itself, especially how social and digital media is changing the discourse on warfare, one thing is apparent, it has become extremely difficult to define victory in war as the notion of victory itself has become subjective.

CNN factor during first Gulf War was considered to be the new factor in warfare, where embedded journalists telecasted the phantasmagoria of war to people's drawing rooms and the horrors of war were turned into infotainment. The world didn't freeze in 1990s; the current pace of information implosion has even surpassed the projections of Alvin and Heidi Toffler's. Artificial intelligence and fake news have completely changed the landscape of how media operates. Mainstream media houses like CNN, BBC and Le Monde may take days and week to build a narrative, a Tik-Toker could blast them through a 30 second video.

Al Jazeera (2024) report quoted Ismail Haniyeh on the martyrdom of his three sons "The blood of my children is not more valuable than the blood of the children of the Palestinian people ... All the martyrs of Palestine are my children." Despite Israeli use of overwhelming fire power on Gaza and attacks on Hamas leadership, Ismael Haniyeh's one message on assassination of his sons by Israeli military has swamped the internet. The Western and Israeli media seems to be losing the war of narrative.

Conclusions

As part of my extensive research on current Israel Palestine conflict as well evolving situation on Russia Ukraine War I took part in regular discussions on different TV channels, including Suno News and also participated in international discussion forums like Defense Politics Asia, to get a pulse from different international groups in a free and bipartisan debate (Khan, 2023). This effort spread over almost two years has helped me in drawing some interesting conclusions.

- a. Despite advancements in technology and Revolution in Military Affairs the Human Factor remains the key in transforming Strategy and Tactics of the war. Hamas and Houthis have resorted to innovation in tactics and strategy. If one compared the force ratio, military technology, firepower, C4ISR (Command, Control, Communication, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) available with Israel and her backers in US and the larger West vis a vis the Houthis and Hamas, there is absolutely no comparison.
- b. Structured and modern militaries operating through defined chain of command and relying on high-tech surveillance system and sophisticated platforms of firepower presume that technological edge can ensure them domination of the battle space and achieve their military objectives. Israeli response to Hamas attacks on 7th October 2023 was also premised on the notion of victory in weeks. We are now into 7th month of the war, Israel has delivered ordinance on densely populated Gaza equal to two Hiroshima Atomic bombs and drawn in international condemnation amounting to Genocide of Hapless civilians, the war goes on. Actually, the War has expanded to entire region including the Red Sea, Lebanon, Iraq and the Mediterranean Sea. Houthis have stepped up attacks on International Maritime trade. The employment of drones, missiles and rockets combined with their ability to acquire targets, without satellites speaks volume about the new strategy.
- c. There is a big question mark on large and powerful navies operating in narrow straits like the Strait of Hormuz as well as Bab al Mandab and transiting through Suez Canal. Have the large platforms like Aircraft Carriers and Cruise Missile launchers supported by modern Air power become redundant? This is ensuing a new debate on the kind of Warfare that we are witnessing today. A cheap drone, a small ammunition laden boat or a ballistic missile costing couple of a thousand of dollars denting the power potential of a Billion dollars' worth of ship or Aircraft Carrier? Drone Warfare is likely to take centre stage and may dominate the battlespace in forceable future. Like arrival of dive bomber and tank in World War 2, drone will become the silver bullet in future wars.
- d. Will demographic factor become predominant in future warfare, this is debatable; however, the Taliban and Axis of Resistance have displayed that a demographically young side with an element of faith in cause and ready to stretch the other side in Time, instead of space could have an upper edge against a side relying on massive firepower and technology.
- e. There is a need for more research on Clausewitz' model of Warfare and the notion of Centre of Gravity.
- f. The employment of Private Military Companies (Black Water, Georgian Legion and Wagner group etc) is giving birth to modern 'condottiere'. With the developed world running out of human resource the future may witness proliferation of such entities, which will become a norm rather than exception. The sustenance of Russia Ukraine war has stretched both sides to their limits. With aging population and declining birthrates, the larger west may have to think of avoiding longer conflicts, especially after suffering reverses in Afghanistan.

References

- Al Jazeera English. (2024, April 10). *Israeli forces kill three children of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Gaza*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/10/israeli-forces-kill-three-children-of-hamas-leader-ismail-haniyeh-in-gaza>
- Almayadeen English. (2024, April 10). From captured UK ship, Yemenis salute Palestinians on Eid al-Fitr. <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/from-captured-uk-ship--yemenis-salute-palestinians-on-eid-al>
- Bellal, A., Giacca G., & Maslen S. C. (2011). International law and armed non-state actors in Afghanistan. *International review of the Red Cross*. <https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-881-maslen.pdf>
- Brassford, C. (2007). Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century. Strachan, H. & Herberg-Rothe, A. (Eds). *4 The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought*, (pp. 74-90). Oxford, <https://doi.org/10.1093/>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.) Post Truth. Retrived April 18, 2024. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/post-truth>
- Champion, M. (2024, March 11). The Houthis are schooling us in asymmetric warfare. *Bloomberg Opinion*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-03-11/the-houthis-are-schooling-us-in-asymmetric-warfare>
- DCAF & Geneva Call. (2015). Armed Non-State Actors: Current Trends & Future Challenges. DCAF Horizon 2015 Working Paper No. 5) https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/144858/ANSA_Final.pdf
- De Villafranca, R. (2009, April 7). Reconsidering Afghanistan: Time for an "Azimuth Check". *U.S. ARMY* https://www.army.mil/article/19352/reconsidering_afghanistan_time_for_an_azimuth_check
- Dickson K. (2022, April 11). *The Return of Clausewitz*. Academic Journals, Joint Forces Staff College. <https://jfsc.ndu.edu/Media/Campaigning-Journals/Academic-Journals-View/Article/2994803/the-return-of-clausewitz/>
- Feroz, E. (2019). 'You have the watches, we have the time'. *TRT World*. <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/you-have-the-watches-we-have-the-time-29643>
- Hawks, B. B. (Ed.) (2018). *Non-state actors in conflicts: Conspiracies, myths, and practices*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/resources/pdfs/978-1-5275-0411-0-sample.pdf?ref=hir.harvard.edu>
- Kelly, R. (2006). *Center of gravity in the asymmetric environment: applicable or not?* US Naval Postgraduate School.
- Khan, W. H. [@DefensePoliticsAsia]. (2024). *Comment on non-state actors and transformation of warfare* [Youtube]. https://www.youtube.com/live/qPqX_58FD2Y?si=iUHnH8Kv__9-Xmsz
- Khan, W. H. [@SUNONewsHD]. (2023, November 14). What is happening in Gaza, Gaza Situation Room [Youtube]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jb8WWLDNh0o>
- Lauder, M. A. (2024). State, non-state, or chimera? The rise and fall of the Wagner Group and recommendations for countering Russia's employment of complex proxy networks, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/20240625-Hybrid-CoE-Working-Paper-33-The-rise-and-fall-of-the-Wagner-Group-WEB.pdf>
- Naureen, A., & Khan, W. H. (2023, December 21). Non state actors and the new form of warfare. *Tribune*. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2451652/non-state-actors-and-the-new-form-of-warfare>
- Naureen, A. (2019, January 30). Post Truth Challenges and Pakistan. *The Nation*. <https://www.nation.com.pk/30-Jan-2019/post-truth-challenges-pakistan>
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. (n.d.). Definition of Post Truth. Retrived April 18, 2024. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/post->

About Author

Brig® Waqar Hasan KHAN | Suno News / Pakistan Army
waqarkauravi[at]gmail.com | ORCID: 0009-0009-5406-6041

Brig(R) Waqar Hasan Khan is a retired Military Officer of Pakistan Army with vast Operational, Command and Teaching experience. He has taught at National Defense University, Islamabad as well as National Defense University of Zimbabwe, Harare. He has three masters to his credit and is currently undergoing PhD in University of Zimbabwe. An avid writer whose work has been published in Pakistani and International newspapers and think tanks. He is currently working as Station Head of Suno News, a leading media house in Pakistan and appears as a defense and security analyst on Pakistani and some international TV channels. His areas of interest include National and International Security and Hybrid Warfare. He has widely travelled to participate in International Seminars and Conferences.