

# Asymmetric war or post-Westphalian war? War beyond the state

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## *1. A first approach to asymmetric war*

Since the end of the Cold War, and especially after 9/11, one particular concept has often been linked to warfare: asymmetry. A quite interesting problem descends from the most general use of this association, i.e. lacking an agreed definition, the meaning of “asymmetric war” changes on the base of whom describes it. Thus, this concept does not have a univocal meaning, or at least, not in literature. Even intuitive and elementary logic can not resolve the issue, the contrary appearance notwithstanding. Any war is asymmetric, if asymmetry is thought simply as the existence of some kind of – lesser or greater – differences between the warring parties. Even accepting such a tautology though does not offer a great deal of help.

An hint that can provide some degree of assistance in building up a more significant meaning can be found in the different use of the “asymmetric war” expression in different times. Until the end of the Cold War, and in many ways until 9/11, the link between warfare and asymmetry has been used in a limited way, to point to a divergence between warring parties not simply inherent mere differences in force quantities. In such a sense it was custom to speak of “asymmetry” only if motivations, doctrine, organization, etc. were so different to make useless – or not much useful – the use of just a classic numeric comparison (e.g., this is the kind of interpretation used about the Vietnam war). However, as it will be possible to notice later on, this use of the concept of “asymmetry” was somewhat flawed because it was related to discrepancies limited by specific boundaries. Implicit limits to disparity were still existing, and – since they were globally accepted – never tamed.

Nowadays “asymmetry” has become the somewhat universal way in referring to warfare. The recent raise in the use of this utterance allows to hypothesize the existence of some kind of modification, making the constant use of “asymmetry” a felt necessity for properly dealing with war in contemporary times. This same idea may be termed differently: war is called today “asymmetric” more often than it was in the past, and this make sensible to think that the simple concept of “war” is felt as insufficient in describing contemporary fighting. “Asymmetry” can then be thought as a sort of model in discerning the way war was fought “before” and the way it is fought “after” (i.e. today) even if we do not know (yet) before and after *what*.

Aside from this first chronological consideration, a second hint in decoding asymmetry applied to war can be found in the etymology of the word itself. A-symmetry, obviously, refers to something non symmetrical, being the two concepts antonyms. Symmetry, it is a composed word in itself, built by two parts: *syn* (the same; simultaneous) and *métron* (measure). Symmetry then refers to “same measurement” or to a “harmony among parts”. On the other hand then, asymmetry can be the simple negation of these ideas, or – in a more extreme way – can present itself as the clash between what it is “not comparable” or “not mutually measurable”<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> About origins and meanings of the word “asymmetry”: Battisti-Alessio 1968; Liddell-Scott 1940; Rocci 1983; Stephanus 1954.

Etymology helps in generating some clarity, especially if applied on what has been discussed just before. In a strict logical way, it allows to overcome the tautological definition of asymmetric war. If asymmetry is intended as “incomparability” instead of just as the existence of any kind of differences, then there is a threshold below which it is not possible to speak properly of asymmetry. On the other hand the chronological perspective enforces this same hypothesis. Post-Cold war asymmetry can be perceived as more asymmetrical than its previous version, and thus taking more on the aspect of “incomparability”. We will come back on this point later on.

Keeping on a lexical level of analysis, ascending from mere asymmetry to its association with war, it is possible to grasp some more hints moving from etymology to grammar. It has been written by two Chinese authors<sup>2</sup>:

In the Chinese grammar there is a fundamental structure that subdivides phrases in two parts: the central one, and the modifier. The relation between the two is of modifying and being modified, i.e. the first modifies the second, and determines its sense and characteristics. In more explicit terms, the first is the appearance, the second the substance. Usually, differences among people or items are defined not on the base of their substance, but on their aspect, the way they do present themselves. In this perspective, the modifier should be considered the proper center of a phrase. Take “red apple” as an example. Before being modified by “red”, “apple” refers only to a kind of fruit in general, and as such is generic in its nature. But “red” adds a specificity that allow to determine that is “this very apple”.

(Liang-Xiangsui 2001, p. 138)

It is easy to notice the analogy: it is sufficient to exchange “war” to “apple” and “asymmetric” to “red”. This brings up essentially three conclusions:

- As grammar shows, “asymmetry” can be a specific qualitative aspect of war;
- “War” is a general concept, having a proper meaning by itself, even in the absence of asymmetry or any other specific dimension. “Asymmetric war” is thus a sub-manifestation of war itself;
- “Asymmetry” can not be in contradiction with “war”, e.g. assuming something which is contrary to the very nature of “war”. “Pacific war” does not mean much, as it does not “dry rain”<sup>3</sup>.

Starting from these considerations, it becomes quite obvious to define the logic step required for moving further. It is impossible to define the peculiar concept of “asymmetric war” without previously defining *what is war*, i.e. dwell upon the concept of war in itself<sup>4</sup>. In dealing with this topic, the chosen approaches will be the same used so far: both chronologic and logic.

## 2. *The state and the war*

Unfortunately, etymology applied on the concept of “war” does not provides the same effective results as it has been the case for “asymmetry”. The English word (as it is the same for its French and Italian equivalent)<sup>5</sup> derives from the Germanic “werra”, that is referred to a flanking maneuver or a battle cry, and thus can be linked, in a generic way, to the idea of fighting. These results are quite too broad to be of effective use.

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<sup>2</sup> Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, authors of *Unrestricted Warfare*. The recalled ideas are Chinese-born, but they do work well even if applied to other languages, e.g. English or Italian.

<sup>3</sup> Aside from rhetoric and poetry of course, which do use oxymoron for peculiar purposes.

<sup>4</sup> About the distinction existing between the global concept of war (*genus*) and its specific manifestations (*species*), see Armao 1994.

<sup>5</sup> See: Bonanate 1998.

However, it is still possible to maintain a linguistic approach, just by changing direction. Checking through dictionaries it is easy to find definitions of war very similar to the following one: “armed struggle among states or coalitions aimed to resolving an international controversy, more or less motivated by true or false (but partial in any case) conflicts of interests or ideologies”<sup>6</sup>. As it is possible to notice, in conventional terms when war is the topic, the dominating idea is one of armed clash among states or, in extreme cases, among parts of the same state (civil war). The common idea about war is thus deeply linked to the concept of state. This latter is considered the main actor in war. Alternatives can be accepted if at least characterized by a state-like ideology. In this perspective, movements of national liberation, insurgents, revolutionaries, factions, etc., are considered to be *acceptable* variants of the state because, even if non structured as states, they do aspire to become states or to modify the government condition in a given area (which is a state-like kind of objective). These actors can thus be defined as *para-states*, and it is not wrong to assume that their inclusion among those considered the proper actors of war (i.e. properly defined states) does not change the *essential monopoly over war exercised by states*.

A basic consequence of state monopoly over war is the main role of armed forces as a way to exercise violence. In total analogy, *guerrilla*, insurgency, revolutionary struggle, etc., are just variants of the regular fighting, used by para-states or by states themselves in peculiar situations. Generally speaking then, war is thought as a violent struggle conducted by states – or para-states – by the means of armed forces – or para-armed forces.

Modern international law does represent these assumption in a very faithful fashion, with limited variants from time to time, due to the greater or lesser acceptance that some practices do enjoy in different times. Precise rules determine whom, how, and at which condition can fight a war (*ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello*). The resulting portrait distinguishes between proper actors and means of war – those just recalled – from improper ones:

When the actor is not [...] sanctioned and legitimated, its armed action is not proper “war”, but pure violence or unjust war.  
(Galli 2004, p. VIII)

In the modern age it becomes a common idea that war – an exclusive state activity, being the state the only subject of the *ius ad bellum* – is a possible event, part of a political scene dominated by sovereign states in mutual struggle [...]. Though, it can only exercised toward the outside, and only against other states (it has then its sense in Europe), and has to be fought between militaries, submitting to the customs of war (*ius in bello*).  
(Galli 2004, p. XIV)

Is thus evident how this idea of war is not general nor universal, but instead it is a specific historic, geographic, and cultural product.

In an historic perspective, having noticed the thigh link existing between the ideas of war and state, it appears logic to analyze the origin of the latter to gain some indications about the former. The generally accepted birth date of what is called the “modern state” is 1648, i.e. the year of the Westphalia peace, end of the Thirty Years war. That is why modern states are also called “Westphalian” states. The revolution brought in the political arena by the born of the modern state had important consequences on military ground. States had better financial qualities, not replicable by other political actors. This allowed for the creation of better armed forces, and was the beginning of the historic process of mutual improvement between state and war, which Charles Tilly effectively described: “The war made the state, the state made war” (Tilly 1984, p. 44). In later times, the born of the national concept permitted the institution of a complex framework of ideas.

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<sup>6</sup> Devoto-Oli 1990. Other dictionaries which do contain similar definitions include *Il nuovo dizionario italiano Garzanti* 1984; *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* 1971. These sources are inherent the Italian language, but the concept of war expressed is the same as it is in English.

All of this was the base of a global strengthening of the concept of war, intended as a state-only business:

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, it became possible to define the specific social activity that we today perceive as war. This was set on the background of a series of new distinctions, typical of state evolution:

- the distinction between public and private, between the spheres of action of state and non-state activities;
- the distinction between inside and outside, between what happens inside a state territory clearly defined and what happens outside of it;
- the distinction, associated to the origins of capitalism, between economics and politics, i.e. the separation between economic private activity from public state activity, and the removal of physical limitations to economic activity;
- the distinction between civilian and military, between legal and non-violent relations inside and violent fighting outside, between civil society and barbarism;
- the distinction between those who bear weapons legitimately, or the non-combatants, and the criminals;

Over all others was established in this same time the distinction between war and peace.  
(Kaldor 1999, p. 31)

Thus, the dominating ideas about state and war still in use today are clearly *modern* assumptions<sup>7</sup>.

In a geographic perspective – which borders geopolitics – the basic issue is about the exportation of the Westphalian model from Europe to the rest of the world, mainly by the way of colonialism. The Western superiority in military terms granted by the political organization in modern states has allowed for the progressive imposition of such model in other areas. However, its application has never been really universal, but its global diffusion – and some positivism – has permitted the consolidation of a mental reduction, i.e. the division of all the world in well-defined and recognizable states. This is what appears still today looking at political world map, local realities notwithstanding, even if in some of these realities modern states are a mere illusion, or are built on a total different frame (an interesting example being provided by Far East states). Thus, the diffusion of modern states has never been universal: it is not today as it has not been in previous times.

The general conclusion that can be built upon these brief historic and geographic considerations is quite simple: modern (or Westphalian) states are eminently Western in conception. They were born in a well defined place and time – XVII century Europe –, improved themselves in the age of Nationalisms, exported their own ways in the world at large, becoming then what it is still considered to be the model of political organization *par excellence*.

Having noticed a thig relation between the concepts of state and of war, much of the implicit tracts of the former become also applicable to the latter. War, in its traditional meaning (which can be called also Westphalian) is then limited to a specific context, in the same way its underlying idea of state is:

Modern (or classical) international society can be regarded as the most successful attempt to combine war with symmetry. In the first place, because the whole process of the limitation of war was founded upon the fact that adversaries shared the same legal and political form, statehood. As war became an institution, sovereign states claimed for themselves the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence in the international society. In order to have the right to wage war it was no longer enough to just have the *power* to do it, but it was also necessary to have the same legal and political *form* as the others.  
(Colombo 2004, p.116)

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<sup>7</sup> See: Galli 2002.

Thus, the born and the evolution of the concept of modern state have shaped war in a specific way, i.e. making it a kind of *game among peers*. This basic assumption has then been crystallized in the international law and in the military doctrine<sup>8</sup>. In this perspective, is then not possible to fight a war in a legitimate way, nor to enjoy of the protection of war rules (e.g. the Geneva conventions), if not adapting to precise forms and behaviors. A peculiar consequence is of interest: the mandatory symmetry of the struggle, both about actors (states) and means (armed forces).

The common idea of war is then not neutral. It contains precise prescriptions about whom and in which manner should fight it, it has an underlying idea of symmetry, and it can be considered a specific cultural product of Western modern history.

### 3. A more general idea about war: Clausewitz

The evaluation about war proposed on the previous paragraph is characterized by a historical perspective. It is interesting to notice that is in the same context – i.e. at the heart of modern Europe – that a different hint, about a more general idea on war, can be found. Such an hint, that is also a due passage for any scholar interested in war, is Carl von Clausewitz *Vom Kriege (On War)*, published in 1832, after Clausewitz death. This work is extensive, controversial, and has generated very different interpretations. It is not possible to dwell now fully in all of *Vom Kriege* intricacies. However, it appears useful to recall some fundamental theoretical aspects of Clausewitz work, in order to acquire some indications pertaining a more general idea of war. It is just after some pages that Clausewitz sketches a first portrait of war:

War is an act of strength, the purpose of which is to force the enemy to submit to our will.  
(Clausewitz 1970, p. 19)

Beside this basilar sketch, Clausewitz specifies also the relations between end and means, adding details to his picture of war:

Strength [...] is then the *mean*, the *end* being the imposition of our will to the enemy.  
(Clausewitz 1970, p. 20)

In this first image war is then presented like a violent clash between two actors which wills are not otherwise compatible. The end, for each party, resides in the imposition of its will over the enemy, this being mutual. This is just the embryo of the Clausewitzian idea of war, yet it is its core.

Of course Clausewitz does not fail in observing another central aspect of war: its extreme fickleness. And it is exactly for this reason that he tries to elaborate something more abstract, his final goal the creation of a definition of war adaptable to all the endless shapes of actual warfare. Clausewitz result based upon these considerations is extremely brief:

War not only resemble a chameleon because changes its aspect in each specific case, but also presents itself, in its general aspect, in the shape of a curious trihedron composed by:

1. its original violence, hate and hostility, to be considered like a *blind instinct*;
2. the game of chances and probabilities, which impresses to war the tracts of a *free activity of the spirit*;
3. its subordinated nature of a tool of politics, which links it back to *reason, pure and simple*.

(Clausewitz 1970, p. 40).

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in today military doctrine, war can happen only among states. Other kind of actions, even if performed by military forces, are referred to by *ad-hoc* labels, e.g. peace support operations; operations other than war; crisis response operations; countering of an asymmetric menace. All of this cases, though, are not considered *proper* war.

Such is the famous Clausewitzian trihedron. In it the author recalls the elements founding a conflict and necessarily present, the only allowed change being about the relative magnitude of each element.

Dwelling more in depth in the Clausewitzian idea of war, the first tract we consider is the second one, i.e. the role of chance and probability<sup>9</sup>. Considering such an element is quite needed in any kind of social theory which aspires to be satisfactory, since human behavior is never completely predictable, especially in a complex context like war. However, it is such a needed presence which allows for making this element implicit. Of course, this does not mean not considering its role *at all*, which would pose us immediately outside of Clausewitz's theory<sup>10</sup>. Having clarified this point, it is possible to move further on, evaluating the remaining two aspects.

The most important among the trihedron faces is the third one. From it it descends the abused idea that "war is just the continuation of politics with other means" (Clausewitz 1970, p. 38). The fundamental point that Clausewitz is trying to make is about war heteronomy, i.e. the fact that war is not conducted for its own sake, but in persecuting a goal defined *outside* of war<sup>11</sup>. War nature then is absolutely instrumental, being just a mean to an end. In anticipating some aspects related to the violent face of war, we can add that violence is the tool on which a war is fought, and characterizing war in itself.

But what are the goals of a war? We already have a reply to this question, on a extremely general level: war are fought to impose will on enemies, this goal being reciprocal, the enemy doing the same on us. In this perspective there is perfect identity of goals between the warring parties. However, in reality, war is not a total confrontation of opposed wills. If it would be like so, every conflict would tend to total mutual annihilation. Even if Clausewitz observes this trend as a specific tract of war, the General also adds a principle of moderation with the introduction of the *political goal*. This latter is the specific end for which a conflict is fought. It is at the political goal that the parties are aiming to in reality, and that they try to reach as the ultimate end of their fighting. It is the political goal that, colliding with the counterpart, does generate the clash of wills, making of the counterpart the actual enemy. The clash of will is then a tract at the very core of war, but it is not the reason of the fighting. All of this bring us back at instrumental rationality and at the principle of limitation on the use of force: the mean should not contradicts the end, thus the use of force will not be pushed over the edge, making it hampers the war end, i.e. the political goal<sup>12</sup>.

Political goals differentiate themselves from the general purpose of war – i.e. the demolition of the enemy will – because they are contingent: annexing one region, changing a political regime, defending a specific population, controlling a resource, and so on. The different actors in a conflict will have – probably, but not necessarily – different political goals. However, these goals still are part of a same conceptual category, and then logically comparable. Furthermore, political goals tend to change during time, in accordance with the actors perspectives.

Evaluating the pertinence of the purposes pursued by the different actors is irrelevant, as long as the mean (war, in its specific shape and intensity it assumes in each case) does not contradict them. Termed differently, relevancy is not in the rationality of the end, but in the rational accordance of the mean with the end. The only mandatory aspect is about the political character of the ultimate goal of war. Furthermore, in order to maintain conceptual coherence, it is not needed for war to be the best of the mean available to attain the specific pursued goal.

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<sup>9</sup> It is from this concept that descend the idea of the "fog of war", often used also by non-Clausewitzians.

<sup>10</sup> The removal of chance and probabilities from the idea of war will generate a sort of bizarre "war determinism". An idea – unfortunately – not too uncommon, some good example being provided by much of the recent debate on RMA.

<sup>11</sup> See: Bonanate 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz dwells often on this issue in his work, especially in the books I and VIII. Even so, many interpretations have distorted this very element. Several contemporary studies to agree, however, to the interpretation here presented. For some of them see: Aron 1991, Bonanate 1998, Jean 2001, Paret 1992, Rusconi 1999.

Moving now on violence, i.e. the first face of the trihedron, it is possible to observe that it gets characterized by its instinctual nature. However, as we have just seen, its destructive potential can not be fully achieved because of the relation between mean and end. This represents the maximum limit to the use of violence in the Clausewitzian theory. On the opposite side, the minimum limit consists in restraining the use of force to mere threats or coercion:

In the case on which forces would be very unequal, instead of reciprocal confrontation mere comparison is sufficient; then fighting will not take place, because the weaker will surely retreat.  
(Clausewitz 1970, p. 52)

The clash is only formally bloodless, but filled with violence nonetheless, and keeps a precise role in the Clausewitzian theory. Several scholars do agree on this interpretation, that also becomes central in understanding a peculiar kind of clash: the Cold War<sup>13</sup> (we will get back on this topic later on). That a different degree of applied violence may be more or less effective in relation of the specific pursued goal is not influential on the kind of abstract considerations we are developing. At this analysis level even the specific ways of applying violence are not relevant.

Since now all of the basic aspects in Clausewitz's war theory have been briefly analyzed, we can recall them in the following schematic manner:

- at least two actors are involved, this generating mutuality;
- the involved actors pursue specific goals (political goals);
- the clash between these goals can not be settled, and this produces a clash of will between the actors;
- at least one actor decides to resolve the dispute by resorting to violence;
- in the resulting condition, not everything can be previously foreseen or calculated.

All of these points can be termed in the following synthetic way: *war is the conscious and rational choice, given limited knowledge, to resort to violence for imposing its own political will on a reluctant actor.*

If the Clausewitzian idea of war is immutable in its constitution, what can change is the relative weight of the parts. But in which way? Quite easily: the more the political goals would be mutually incompatible, the greater would be the clash between the opposing wills. This, in turn, would increase the use of violence. On the other hand, the lesser the resistance the opposing party would raise against the pursued political goal, the smaller would be the amount of violence used. It is in this relation that the Prussian General individuates the concepts of *absolute war* – i.e. the kind that more closely resembles a total clash of wills (still being not one though), and thus pushes toward a greater use of violence – and *real war* – i.e. a kind of limited or lesser conflict<sup>14</sup>. Of course this kind of dichotomy is of the abstract kind, and thus does not provide clear borders where the cut one concept from the other.

All that has been recalled so far allows for defining the logical extension of the Clausewitzian concept of war. The upper limit is provided by situations in which the use of force will be so exaggerated to contradict the goal. In such a kind of situations, war would have lost its instrumental nature, and then would be no more war in a Clausewitzian sense, the first face of the trihedron being lost. The lower limit is about avoiding violence, and in the subsequent inexpression of the (eventual) clash of wills. In this kind of situation, the clash of wills either does not exist or it is kept on a latent status. In both cases there is no war. However, it is better to clarify that violence is still violence even when confined to threats, i.e. not actual use of force is required for violence to be present. Cases of this kind are not below the lower limit, and should be considered as proper war in the Clausewitzian sense.

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<sup>13</sup> See: Aron 1991, Paret 1992.

<sup>14</sup> On this topic see also Rusconi 1999.

Clausewitzian war is a very effective model on an heuristic level of analysis. It can be applied with success to all the clashes of the modern era. Several cases can be related to the idea of real war, since the interest of the parties was limited and this brought to a limited use of violence. Examples are the Crimea War, or all the *guerres en dentelles* fought among European states during the XVII and XVIII centuries. Situations on which the conflicts were built on an ideological base and have then sparked more violent confrontations can also be easily spotted: from the Napoleonic Wars, from which Clausewitz took inspiration, to the World Wars.

The Cold War could appear a controversial case, since it has never reached the level of an actual military clash. But it is exactly this specific feature that shows in detail the effectiveness of the Clausewitzian thought:

Total nuclear war would not be the continuation of politics with other means, or with the mixing of other means, if these latter would identify themselves with the whole of nuclear weapons available. A war of this kind would destroy the meaning of politics in the measure on which this latter requires that the goals should be reached without incurring in losses that would be disproportioned to the involved interests. There is no observable interest in the sum of destructions that would be suffered by the United States and the Soviet Union in the case of a total nuclear war. If ascending to the extremes means, in our times, escalating toward nuclear warfare, the meaning of one of the two Clausewitzian trends changes radically. The ascending trend would tend to annihilation battles: the beaten enemy would concede, allowing for the conditions of the winner to be imposed. But today at the upper levels of the ladder of violence there are the nuclear weapons which force a choice between the two Clausewitzian principles: destruction and annihilation on one side, the superiority of politics on the other. If, as I am convinced, this latter principle dominates Clausewitz thought in its final synthesis, then only our century [the XX] or our days have clearly displayed the meaning of the Clausewitzian cliché formula.

(Aron 1991, pp. 116-117)

In other terms, placed on the perspective of starting a conflict which was feared to end in mutual annihilation, the superpowers have been forced on refraining from the actual use of force. Risking to go beyond the idea of absolute war, they have limited the conflict at his conceivable minimum, generating the maximum available example of real war, i.e. a conflict resolved on the base of pure threat<sup>15</sup>.

This interpretation of the Cold War not only demonstrates the effectiveness and the adaptability of the Clausewitzian thought even to situations that were outside of Clausewitz reach, but it also reinforce the theory included in the *Vom Kriege*:

The dissuasive employ of nuclear weapons fulfill a niche of which the Clausewitzian conceptualization showed the existence without filling it because of the lack of historical experience: the diplomatic employment of weapons with the purpose of avoiding the actual use of them. The so-called dissuasion strategy can be defined exactly like the employment of the nuclear threat in order to avoid the practical execution of the threat.

(Aron 1991, p. 8)

The unavoidable moderating role of politics – i.e. the evaluation of the opportunity of the actions to put in to place in order to achieve a specific goal – has been determinant in moderating an use of force that would have been otherwise annihilating.

In November 1989 the bipolar confrontation has ended. In September 2001 the United States have been attacked in the heart of their own territory. Many have hypothesized that the time of Clausewitzian and symmetric wars has ended forever. We will try to consider the pertinence of such a kind of thought on the base of what we have gathered so far.

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<sup>15</sup> See: Bonanate 2004.

## 4. War and asymmetry

We have now in our hands two different ideas about war: one of the historical kind (Westphalian), and the other of the abstract kind (Clausewitzian). The two has often been considered coincident. However, we will try to keep them separated and to intersect the specific aspects of each one to the idea of “asymmetry”. The results of this exercise may reveal themselves quite interesting.

### 4.1 Chronological perspective: from Westphalian war to asymmetric war

As it has recalled in the first paragraph, an element which allows to formulate some hypothesis about asymmetric war is the different inter-temporal use of this very utterance. Some preliminary observations about this topic has already been advanced. We will try now to add to them the elements included in the traditional and Westphalian idea of war.

It has already been noticed how war intended in its classical sense has an implicit meaning of *symmetry* included in itself. Termed differently, as long as war has been confined into its traditional schema – i.e. the clash between states fought with armed forces – it was *the* war, without any need for further specifications. These latter, if present, were referred to specific ways of fighting, instead than relating to some abstract aspects of war. War intended in its traditional sense is then eminently and implicitly symmetric. This consideration helps in understanding why war has been defined as “asymmetric” so often in later times. Contemporary war is no longer perceived as a struggle among equals. Being symmetry somewhat included in the modern idea of war it has become mandatory to specify, with the use of the adjective, a breaking of the underlying implicit rule. In this sense, the line drawn between the “before” and the “after” of the war with the massive use of the concept of “asymmetric war” is due to the perceived immanence of conflicts of states vs. non-states, or just among non-states. Part of these new kind of conflicts has already manifested, another part is still – at least for now – latent. Even in this latter case, however, what really matters is the perceived immanence of this new kind of conflict.

It is useful to consider that between para-states and non-states there is a deep difference. Both categories are formed by actors not structured in the state form. But while the former aspire and inspire themselves to statehood, the latter are characterized by a substantial absence of relation with the concept of state (even if they can draw some elements of strength from the state or some of its part). In this sense, non-states transcend statehood.

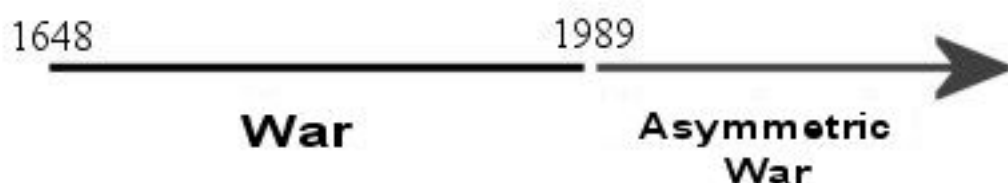
The introduction of non-state actors on the battlefields create a deep fracture with the previous time of Western history. For this reason, asymmetry in war, as it is intended today, is more “asymmetric” of its previous version (pre-1989) when the differences remarked were compliant with the intrinsic valence of symmetry implicit in war. In adopting such a perspective it appears licit to think of today asymmetry as of “incomparability” (between the parties) instead of “deep inequality”, this latter being a meaning better suited to the previous time.

This analysis allows for a first definition of asymmetric war. Given the intrinsic idea of clash among peers included in the traditional idea of war, the hypothesis proposed in the introduction – i.e. the will to remark some substantial new dimension in contemporary war – gets confirmed. The new dimension is about the loss of equality among the parties involved in a conflict. The word “asymmetry”, when related to war has then a double meaning: it denies the implicit symmetry and counters it with the opposite concept. In this sense “asymmetric war” is defined on a chronological basis, allowing for the distinction between modern war (war among states) and its next kind, i.e. post-modern war (war between states and other actors, or just among these). In other terms it remarks the end of the mandatory relation between statehood and war. Even if 9/11 may appear as the more intense manifestation of this likely trend, it seems more appropriate to look at the fall of the Berlin Wall – i.e. at 1989 – as the parting date between “old” and “new”. With the

wall it also felt a determined international order, clearly characterized, and it has not been promptly substituted by another with analogical tracts. Furthermore, war fought in the '90s presents themselves as more post-modern than modern<sup>16</sup>.

Moving on a logic perspective this interpretation poses war and asymmetric war on two distinct analytical levels, the latter overcoming the first. For this reason, the asymmetric form of war can not be thought as a specific kind of war, but it is instead the evolution of it. In this sense asymmetric war and war are mutually exclusive (picture 1).

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the *Vom Kriege* too. If what has been analyzed in the previous paragraph would be framed in a modern scheme, the results would be likely to resemble those just reached. Otherwise said, it is possible to state that Carl von Clausewitz is a modern author, and as such he thought of war, imagining the state as the legitimate monopolist of it<sup>17</sup>. Along these lines it is possible to look at the trihedron as a sort of more deep and complex interpretation of the traditional concept of war. In conclusion Westphalian war and Clausewitzian war would be one and the same, appearing as coincident, and asymmetric war would represent the overcoming of both.



Picture 1

#### 4.2 Logical perspective: Clausewitz and asymmetry

Leaving behind evaluations of the historical kind it is possible to propose a re-interpretation of the *Vom Kriege* that allows for more interesting results. The analysis previously developed about Clausewitzian thought has been eminently theoretical, and as such it is not forcefully bonded to the modern framework. Then the question is: is licit to think of an abstract interpretation of the *Vom Kriege*? Termed differently: there are in Clausewitz tracts of such a general nature allowing them for reaching outside their own historical context? The answer we do suggest is: yes. Clausewitz was a man of his time and thinking of his work without remembering this may lead to misinterpretations. However, the more theoretical sections of his work are remarkable for their extreme generality, able to renew themselves at each new challenge. A demonstration of this has already been observed about the Cold War. Even being this true, a post-modern – i.e. post-Westphalian – interpretation of *Vom Kriege* appears as more problematic, because it does not only relate with the introduction of some new tool of war (as they were the atomic weapons) but because it changes the political roots of war itself. Nonetheless, it is not so crazy to get rid of the idea of state, still being faithful to the *Vom Kriege* theory. Besides, in the trihedron the state does only appear in a limited fashion, as an example, in the form of the government.

<sup>16</sup> See: Gray 1997; Kaldor 1999. Ideas about post-modern war were developing far sooner than 9/11.

<sup>17</sup> With the partial exception of “people’s war”.

In the definition of war autonomously developed basing upon Clausewitzian thought (*war is the conscious and rational choice, given limited knowledge, to resort to violence for imposing its own political will on a reluctant actor*) no specific actor is previously defined, nor it is any required form of equality or similarity among them. This interpretation of Clausewitzian war is broader than its modern counterpart, and the idea of modern war (with all its tracts and limits) can be thought as sub-set of it.

This definition of war does not have any aspect in it related to symmetry. Then, if war can be accepted to be like this, how will it be when related to asymmetry? It is known that at least two actors are required to fight a war. For the sake of simplification, it is possible to accept an ideal case of conflict between just two actors (even if the following model can be extended to more complex cases involving more actors quite easily). Asymmetry should then present itself in incomparability between the two sides. A simple model that can be very effective in trying to cover every possible aspect that can thus be raised it is provided by the five elementary questions: why? whom? how? where? when?

- **Why?** i.e.: for what reason the two actors are fighting? We already have a reply to this question: the wills of the actors are incompatible, then they clash violently in a mutual attempt at domination. At the abstract level then there is a perfect identity of purposes between the warring parties, and thus there can not be any kind of asymmetry.

At a more concrete level political goals should be added to the picture. As we have already discussed, political goals can be – and often are – different between the warring parties. However, being part of the same conceptual category they can be at very maximum extremely different but still they can not reach “incomparability”.

The general definition of war on which we are founding these thoughts has on its inside precise indications about the goals of the conflict. For this reason, the adjective “asymmetric” can not exercise its function over the substantive to the point where it would deny the proper tracts of this latter. Such a case would be an oxymoron.

Purposes and goals can not be asymmetric, otherwise we would talk no more of war. In this sense, the maximum limit of asymmetry in war is set.

- **Whom?** i.e.: who are the warring parties? In a traditional sense, based on Western history it has already been noticed that states (and some variant on them) are the usual actors in conflicts. The abstract perspective on war on which are now dwelling also does not include any indication about actors. Then there is no contradiction in supposing that different kind of actors can become a part in a conflict, in pursuing their own political agenda. The common example can be provided by Islamic terrorist networks, but of course the range of possible actors can be easily increased, for example to networks *per se*, in an attempt to differentiate between the model of organization (the network) and the way of fighting (terrorism) which is more properly related to the *how?*. Liang and Xiangsui<sup>18</sup> suggest several kinds of alternate actors in conflict, like speculators, hackers, and so on. Thus, in a general sense can be considered as a potential actor of war *any actor capable of offensive actions in the pursuit of a political goal*.

New actors of war are advantaged on two sides, if compared to states. First of all they are more confident with the new tools of war – i.e. non-military means – because these are they everyday tools of work or operation (this point will be further explained in the *how?* section). Secondary, lesser limitations – of any kind: legal, moral, conceptual – bond them to already defined ways of actions:

The spheres drawn by visible or invisible borders, and recognized by the international community, lose their validity. This because all the actors without national power that undertake

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<sup>18</sup> Liang, Xiangsui 2001.

war operations of the non-military kind to declare war on the international community employ means that overcome the usual reality of nations and regions, and the related ways of defense. The “visible” national borders, the “invisible” world wide web space, the national and international laws, behavioral norms, and ethic principles can not hamper them in any way. They do not answer to anyone, nor are they limited by rules. When they have to pick a target they are capable to choose any mean and to exercise any kind of slaughter.

(Liang, Xiangsui 2001, p. 114)

Having briefly analyzed the new actors of war let’s apply to them the asymmetric idea. When can be said that there is asymmetry in war on an actor level? Simply, when asymmetric – i.e. non comparable – kind of actors face themselves in war. State vs. non-state is the simplest example of asymmetric clash. In this perspective, a struggle of a state with another can not be considered as asymmetric, just because of different tracts.

**How?** i.e.: with which means war is fought? Traditionally, the proper tool of war has been military strength, i.e. the armed force. But, as it has been about actors, even in this case the definition of war we are using is not giving any detail about the kind of force to be employed, the only specified element being about violence. Of course, for a mean to be violent it is not required to be violent *in itself* (as it is for weapons), but it is just required a *violent use* of it. In such a sense, it appears more rational to classify tools of war basing upon their *use* and not on their *nature*. In analogical terms, it is possible to speak of the passage from proper weapons of war to improper weapons of war (but still, weapons of war).

Having established the pertinence to dwell on non-military means, the next question to ask is: it is reasonable to think of the use of this new kind of weapons in a war scenario? A brief look to recent history is more than enough to make the question rhetoric:

There is a definite relation between contemporary warfare [...] and the *Vom Kriege* parts where it is affirmed that: *in war action is never directed against pure matter, and moral aspects should not be neglected*. From this point emerges the pivotal role of propaganda and mass-media. Furthermore is often unnecessary to keep on with the operations until having annihilated the enemy. For causing its breaking without destroying its military power it is sufficient to bring in act actions that do have an immediate political outcome (as it is also true for terrorist actions). *If there are actions especially able to disrupt or paralyze the enemy alliances, to bring to us new ones, to generate political outcries against the enemy to our advantage, then it is clearly visible how these actions can greatly enhance the chances of success and achieve the goal with a far shorter way than not force destruction*. Words that relate very well with our actual condition, with Western media amplifying the negative echoes of some actions, while on the other side terrorist acts help in recruiting new adepts to the cause of terrorist organizations<sup>19</sup>.

(Botti 2004, p. 17)

Of course, not media nor terrorists are today on their first appearance on the war stage. The main difference between the past and today is about the chance of these means to act even in the absence of some military – or para-military – force. But terrorism and medias are not the only alternatives to military force: there are plenty of new possibilities. In a sense, the idea of *military operations other than war*<sup>20</sup> has been overcome by the idea of *non-military war operations*:

Which means (among all the non-conventional ones), apparently not related to warfare, will become the chosen one for this new way of fighting – the *non-military war operation* – more and more often used around the world? In the first place commercial warfare. [...] In the second

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<sup>19</sup> Italic text is quoted from Clausewitz.

<sup>20</sup> See: FM 100-5 1993, and successive doctrinal elaborations.

place financial warfare. [...] In the third place the new terrorist warfare [...]. In the last place ecologic warfare.  
(Liang, Xiangsui 2001, p. 80-84)

On the theoretical level no discrimination about the possible use of any mean by any actor is considered. On an abstract perspective both states and non-states can resort to any kind of means, i.e. both military and non-military. However, on a concrete level the different options would not be all equals. It has been noticed, on the previous point, an existing relation between actors and means in war. The introduction of new means would more likely advantage to the new actors instead of the old, i.e. non-states over states. These latter can lose the status of better organizer of violence, which they have enjoyed as long as armed forces have been the better tool of war. Reversing the perspective it is possible to observe that is the availability of harmful tools other than the military allowing for non-state empowerment. Thus, non-state become able to exercise political will in a violent way. This framework is further complicated by the rise of actors such as private security firms, i.e. actors willing to provide military skills to paying customers. All of this of course does not deny that states too can resort to heterodox means of war, if the situation demands, maybe just for making irrelevant enemy superiority in the military sector.

Back on asymmetry it can be concluded that it does exist on this analytical level when warring parties resort to different means. Differences on quantity of force, or operative modes do not matter. Replying to military strength with financial warfare is asymmetry. Replying to the same with a low intensity conflict is not.

**Where?** i.e.: where war is fought? The advent of new actors and new means alters the space of the conflict, increasing it, in three different ways: by *extension*, *expansion*, and *erosion*.

The extension movement is not new but centuries old. When weapons were mainly of the melee kind clashes were shaped like single dots (single warriors facing each other in hand-to-hand confrontations). Firearms allowed for the development of a linear model. Mechanization introduced the idea of depth, and then the air force added the third dimension. With the advent of non-military means of fight it is possible to hit even in non-military or non physical space, i.e. wherever it was not possible before because of material or moral limits. In this latter sense, the extension trend become expansion, bringing war into different kind of spaces like the social fabric, the world wide web, the electromagnetic spectrum, etc. Erosion means that the border between the different spaces of the conflict are gradually destroyed, making different kinds of space fade one into each other<sup>21</sup>. The subordination of space to actors and means – which both determine the change about space – can be explained in the following way:

Clashes will be in any part of the planet, in places favorable to the specific weapon or non-weapon chosen by the attacker. If terrorism should be used by the East against the West, then the elected place would be any vulnerable place into the Western world, or among its “henchmen” and allies in the Eastern world, able to grant a high number of casualties, and to inflict serious material and psychological damage. If the weapon should be a computer attack then the proper place would be anywhere where information technology is developed enough and not effectively protected, both East or West. If the weapon should be financial destabilization then the proper places would be stock markets. Finally, if the weapons should be political destabilization, the proper places would be political and diplomatic centers, both national and international, where it is possible to exercise coercion or influence operations, extremely developed nowadays.  
(Mini 2003, p. 92)

Space in XXI century warfare is then all-inclusive. About asymmetry, it is easy to argue that there is no possible application of the concept: notwithstanding changes about war

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<sup>21</sup> See: Liang-Xiangsui 2001.

space, where an actor attacks the other should defend or – at very least – suffer. Space will be the same for both warring parties, even if the perception of it can be very different.

**When?** i.e. what are the times (and timing) of war? The answer to such a question is analog to what has been said about space. New actors and means generate a significant change about time, which become more flexible. For example, offensive financial operations can be done in 24 hours or less<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand a terrorist campaign can be hanged at leisure, generating the illusion of peace. Limits proper of the military tool – still valid for such a mean – are no more influencing the whole timing of war. Duration and intensity can now reach new levels – both on the upper and lower end – previously unthinkable.

The analogy with the spatial dimension extends also over the application of asymmetry to time. As long as a party it is still in war, it also is the other, this latter being conscious of it or not, willing or not. However, different capabilities in exploiting different or extremely variable operative tempos may generate opportunities, which in turn can be employed to hit (or unbalance) the adversary. All of these changes though, even if deep, can not be termed as asymmetry.

We will try now to condensate all of what has been analyzed using these five basic questions in a more agile shape. War, in its strictest definition, defines the nature of the goals, which thus can not be altered by asymmetry. On the other hand it is licit the introduction in war of new actors and means, as long as these latter are characterized by a violent use. Asymmetry between actors or means can exist, and this allow for a conflict to be termed properly as asymmetric. Time and space change because of the new actors and means, but are not capable of expressing asymmetry on their own. Then, there are three distinct levels:

1. on the upper level there are goals. They are defined by war in itself and are thus not modifiable by asymmetry. They have not changed from previous times and do not allow for any distinction between symmetric or asymmetric wars;
2. on a mid level there are actors and means. At least one of them should be incomparable between the warring parties to allow for a war to be properly defined as asymmetric (and vice-versa both of them should be similar to allow for symmetry). Actors and means are thus the proper domain of asymmetry. Small differences about the use of a mean or about the tracts of an actor are not sufficient to speak of asymmetry;
3. on the lower level there are space and time. They are not able to make a war asymmetric because they are always symmetric between the parties. However, they deeply change because of the transformations on the mid level.

There are some last question that could be asked, and that have not found (yet) any answer. The first of them is about asymmetry in war: why it has become a feature of warfare? Basically, two reasons can be provided. The first one: *need*. Some actors have no viable alternatives. The second one: *effectiveness*. With asymmetric actions it is possible to deny or decrease the effectiveness of the enemy superiority in a given field<sup>23</sup>. The current clash between the United States and Al Qaeda does reflect both these aspects. The terrorist network has not the chance nor the interest in building up a regular army. All considered, no armed force in the post-bipolar world is capable to confront the US armed forces, so it appears plain why the challenge to the United States is brought to them in unorthodox ways.

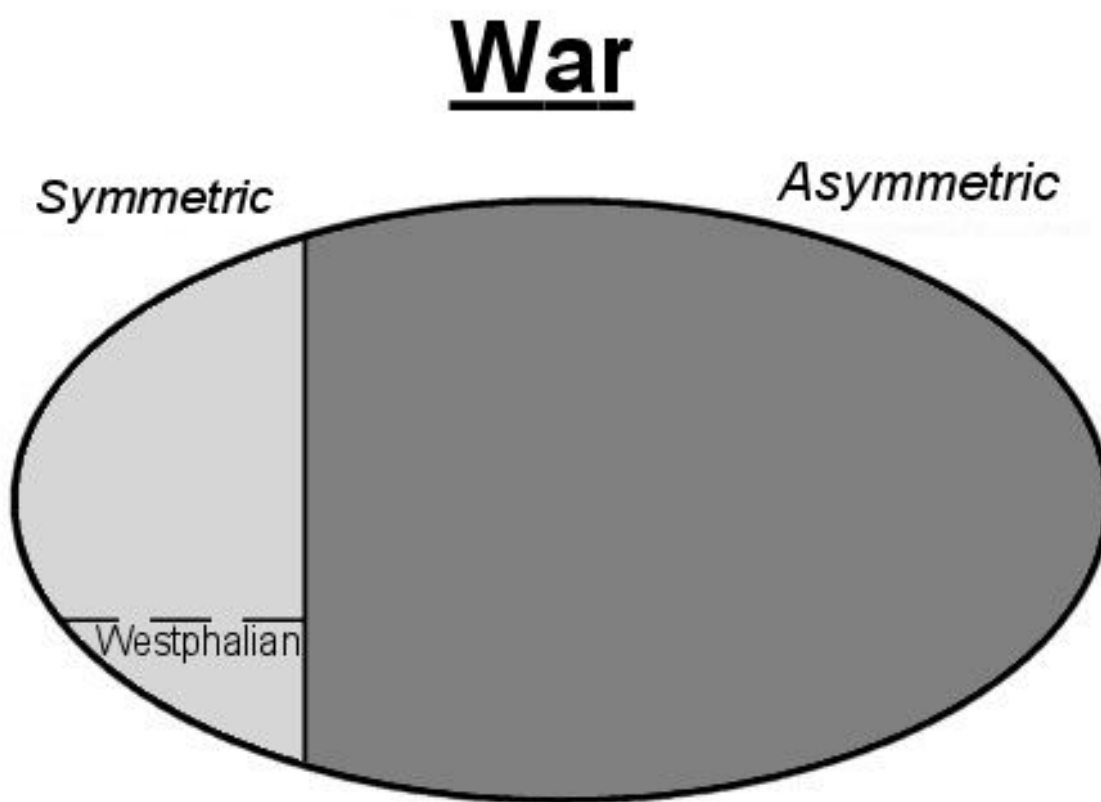
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<sup>22</sup> Some of Gorge Soros operations can be took as a kind of example. See: Soros 1995.

<sup>23</sup> This is also perceived in official US doctrine: “asymmetry becomes very significant, perhaps decisive, when the degree of dissimilarity create exploitable advantages” (FM 3-0, 2001, 4-109).

Another interesting aspect about asymmetry in war is about the *mix*<sup>24</sup>. This is the cocktail generated by intersecting the most different actors and means in war. Asymmetry can manifest itself in the clash between different mixes of actors, mixes of means, or both. In this perspective, the elementary analysis conducted so far can be complexified at leisure, mixing actors and means in all the thinkable ways.

The end result is double. Having dwelled upon the meaning of asymmetric war, also its reciprocal should become clear, i.e. what is *symmetric war*. Asymmetry is required on at least the actors level or the means level. If neither of them is asymmetric, then the war is symmetric. What it is interesting is that this idea of symmetric war *does not* coincide with traditional or Westphalian war. This last it is just one kind of symmetric war among many. Two networks who decide to resort to criminal means for fighting each other are still an example of symmetric war, even if surely not-Westphalian, and far far away from the state-military dichotomy. All these results are summarized in the picture (picture 2).



Picture 2

Along this line of thought war is then a single item, the unity of the concept never being questioned. Symmetry and asymmetry are mutually exclusive, and for this reason the border line between the two is solid. Of course, all the possible shapes and forms that asymmetry could assume are greater in number than the symmetric alternatives, all the mixes being possible in the first case and being not on the latter. This is reflected in the scheme by the greater area accorded to asymmetry. Finally, since Westphalian war is just a kind of symmetric war, it is represented as one sub-set of it. Of course, this kind of scheme has merely explicative purposes, and should not be applied in a

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<sup>24</sup> See: Liang, Xinagsui 2001.

straightforward, deterministic manner. This would be a deep contradiction with Clausewitzian thought, which is eminently anti-deterministic<sup>25</sup>.

#### 4.3 About the two models.

Having developed two different ways to look at war, we try now to make some comparison between them, and to add some details.

The first approach is characterized by an historical cut. Its main limit is about the need of changing the idea of war on the base of different historical manifestations, with the rise and fall of different political actors. As it has been shown, between 1648 and 1989 the West has grown accustomed to the idea of war as an exclusively state-related activity. The immediate consequence of this is the impossibility to adapt war at the non-state realities, pre- and post-modern. In this perspective, asymmetric war presents itself as the overcoming of symmetric and Westphalian war, (re)opening the war scene to non-states.

The dichotomy imposed about the “before” and “after” of the war though, is quite arbitrary and not much satisfying. It creates a fracture between what is perceived as “proper” war – i.e. Westphalian war – and other war-like activities, not properly considered war though (even if perhaps they already were in a pre-modern time). The very idea of conventional inter-state conflict has become far less relevant in recent days. Then the doubt is about the opportunity of keeping a fundamental concept like war related to just one of its specific manifestations, also one of decreasing importance. This interrogative is not merely academic: as examples is possible to consider the influence it brings over legal matters, or military doctrine.

On the other hand, the model build up over Clausewitzian foundations allows for maintaining conceptual unity. War can take any kind of form or shape, keeping its identity in its essential tracts. War is thus defined independently from the actors involving in it and the means used. Then not only the link between state and war falls, but it also does that between war and militaries.

Furthermore, even being willing to keep a traditional look at war, it is quite apparent the loss of military monopoly over war affairs. First of all, the militaries in themselves have introduced among their arsenals a quantity of tools and ways not eminently military. In such a perspective, a professional soldier may be more resembling to a computer technician instead than to a brawly warrior. Also, we are witnessing a massive participation in war of para-militaries, i.e. civilians who embraces military ways of fighting. Paradoxically then, a civilian may seem more like a traditional warrior than a soldier is able to. And then there are the non-militaries, i.e. civilians who fought with non-military means. Heisbourg has identified four categories on today’s and tomorrow’s battlefields: infantrymen, computer techies, terrorists, and civilians<sup>26</sup>. They are just examples, a further kind being provided – for example – by the new mercenaries fighting for private security firms.

The distinction between militaries and civilians is one of those on which the modern concept of war is based, and it is somewhat faltering. It seems that the same fate is hanging over the other modern distinctions as well<sup>27</sup>. One of these which deserves some more attentions is the one about “inside” and “outside”. In past time violent actions were mainly categorized basing upon where they did happen: if inside the state, they were criminal or police actions; if outside they were war (or military, since the concepts were coincident) actions. This way of looking at violence has assumed nowadays a limited sense. In a way, states are no longer force-monopolists, while in

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<sup>25</sup> This recalls the clash between Clausewitz and Jomini ideas in the XIX century, and the development of the two different schools of thought identified by Mordaq in 1912: “ideological” and “doctrinarian”. See: Botti 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Heisbourg 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Aside from Kaldor (on which we have dwelled already), other interesting similar point of views are those of: Beck 1999, Holsti 1996, van Creveld 1991.

another, it becomes more and more difficult to establish clear borders between organizations, including states<sup>28</sup>. Organizations shade one into another, traversing themselves in a criss-cross web:

Modern nations are more and more often influenced by local or global organizations like the European Union, the ASEAN, the OPEC, the APEC, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the WTO, and – more important of them all – the United Nations. Beside of these, a growing number of multinational organizations and non-states of any kind and dimension, like multinational companies, commercial associations, pacifist and wildlife groups, the Olympic Committee, religious and terrorist organizations, small groups of hackers, constantly intersect the path of a nation.  
(Liang, Xiangsui 2001, p. 158)

If borders fall, then it also does the chance of defining war basing on them. Moreover, the need of states to use a mix of police and military means to face the actual threats, both on their inside and outside further strengthen the fading trend of the inside/outside dichotomy.

The interpretation of war which we have build on Clausewitzian thought appears useful also in explaining the progressive trend of war toward de-militarization and the decreasing role of the state. A central point in *Vom Kriege* is the ascending trend of any conflict:

War is an act of force, to which no limits do exist. The fighters impose law on each other, and thus the result is a reciprocal action which pushes toward the extreme.  
(Clausewitz 1970, p. 22)

Such a push is of the ideal kind. We already know of one limit to the full rise toward the top: the link between end and means. Clausewitz also added other limitations, of lesser importance. All of these restraints, even if denying to war the chance to reach the extreme – i.e. pure annihilation – do not obstruct the general trend toward a greater use of violence. In a way it is possible to apply this line of thought to general transformation about war instead than to single conflicts. Up to 1989 it is possible to spot two trends in war development. The first of the *vertical* kind, poised to maximize effectiveness and destructivity of weapons. The second of *horizontal* kind, trying to include as much non-military activities into military affairs – militarization. Indeed it is possible to read modern Western history with such a double key. Some examples can be provided by: the advent of firearms (vertical movement), the introduction of the draft (horizontal movement), strategic bombing (vertical), total war (horizontal), nuclear weapons (vertical). War has progressively extended its range until finally reaching the maximum possible destructivity – i.e. absolute, total, and indiscriminate devastation by the mean of nuclear weapons – and the maximum possible grasp on society – with total “militarization” through total war, making of each individual a gear in the war machine. War seemed to have reached, by the means of these two trends, the maximum possible extension. But what we have recalled by citing Clausewitz is the constant push of war toward growth. So, how that can be possible anymore? The answer is quite easy: since a development in a military sense it is no longer viable war will try to *grow outside* of this only sector. While in previous times the use of non-military means in warfare did require their precedent militarization – i.e. integration in the military apparatus – today non-military means have become capable of exercising force on their own. War has then exceeded its proper military character on which it has relied upon all along its history. Thus it can be said that war has entered its *post-military* era. Of course, this does not mean that militaries are no more relevant, but just that they are no longer indispensable in defining a condition of war<sup>29</sup>.

War in its Clausewitzian interpretation has then a very ample heuristic reach, being able to include any conflict, pre-modern, modern, and post-modern. Furthermore, about these latter, it allows for the development of a deeper insight, able to perceive both of their main aspects: post-

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<sup>28</sup> Aside from the classic territorial aspect, even if it also becomes sometimes quite questionable.

<sup>29</sup> A similar periodization – even if not founded on Clausewitzian elements – has been built by Holsti. See: Holsti 1996.

statehood (which recalls some pre-modern elements) and the post-military trend (which is something absolutely new).

## 5. Conclusions

The end result appears quite disorienting. This is due in many ways to a cultural bias: it is Western history that has shaped Western minds in thinking about war. Taking China as an alternative example, even if characterized by a statehood history in itself (but of a different kind), it does not find exceedingly difficult to think of war in terms similar to those developed in the previous paragraphs<sup>30</sup> (but for the absence of Clausewitz). It is not a chance then that one of the most interesting recent interpretations about war has been born in China. It is called “unrestricted warfare”, and we have already drawn much inspiration from it. However, the purpose of its authors is not merely descriptive. They do not simply dwell on what is war and how it has changed, but they also point to what they perceive to be the right path to follow for XXI century warriors. Aside from apparent extremeness, this way of looking at war does present itself as deeply rational:

On a theoretical level, “going beyond the limits” should mean not having any kind of limitation – go over anything – but in reality total overcoming of limits it is not possible to reach. Any overcoming of limits can be hypothesized only if restrained. This means that “going beyond the limits” does not mean “no limits” but instead means expanding what is “limited”. This in turn means overcome limits implicit in some areas or directions, and combine opportunities and means among more areas and directions, in order to reach the pursued goal. This is our definition of “combined warfare beyond limits”.  
(Liang, Xiangsui 2001, p. 157)

Even the Western world is not totally outside of such a way of thinking, as reminded by the same Chinese authors:

Present day soldiers like Powell, Schwarzkopf, or even Sullivan (U.S. Chief of staff from 1991 to 1995) or Shalikashvili can not be considered properly “modern”. Indeed, they appear more like traditional soldiers. This because between traditional soldiers and those that can be termed “modern” soldiers a huge gap has already established. Even if it is not an insuperable gap, it still requires a total re-thinking of military matters. [...]. In the end it can be a quite simple process: the new required method is about building the perfect military Machiavelli. To reach the goals with any mean, noble or ignoble: this is the most important lesson of the great political thinker from Renaissance.  
(Liang, Xiangsui 2001, p. 155-156)

Thus, for the Western world such a vision of conflict it is not totally new. In this perspective Machiavelli has exceeded in his vision, developing ideas that only today can be fully grasped. It is also true that he was in a sort of privileged position, not being conditioned by three centuries and a half of pure Westphalian conception of conflicts.

All of this brings us back to a central point, i.e. the changing role of the state. What is fundamental to notice is that the state is nowadays no longer the monopolist of international violence, nor of violence *per se*, but it has lost his role, willing or not, to the advantage of other actors. This change can be temporary or not, long-lasting or not, but anyway it is the current reality, and probably will remain so in the next future. This decline of the state has consequences over several levels. In abstract we face the overcoming of statehood: non-state actors able to exercise violence for political means, and not aspiring to become states, do exist today. On a more concrete level the main consequence is the advent of non-military ways of fighting in warfare. Some of the tools are a state emanation, like police forces or intelligence. Some others are not, such as mercenaries, terrorist, financial speculation, and IT attacks:

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<sup>30</sup> See: Mini 1998.

While there is no clearly identifiable *successor state* to the U.S. at this time there are numerous potential *successor scenarios*, all of which are already a feature of the international landscape. For example, nation-states may ultimately be supplanted by religious empires (with Islam the leading contender); corporate-states which are defined by the integrative and directing power of the corporation (completely independent of cultural, social or geographical restraints); global criminal syndicates which control significant resources and territory and are, for all intents and purposes, a type of 'nation'; and civilizational 'black-holes' incorporating failed states, proto-states, permanent international welfare cases, permanently polluted regions, militarized zones in which a constant state of war exists and massive groups of displaced and or diseased peoples. While these scenarios do not necessarily require the elimination of the nation-state *per se* in order to emerge and flourish, it is clear that the emergence of such scenarios singularly or in combination will challenge even the most advanced nations and will require significant strategic choices.

(Eustace 2001)

A similar scenario has been developed also by François Heisbourg, which believes that the XXI century will witness the clash between states and the recently empowered non-states. In this challenge states are disadvantaged because they can be hit in heterodox ways (being strength employed in a non-conventional – i.e. non-military – way), and because they are used to parity (i.e. to face other states)<sup>31</sup>.

All considered the reconstruction of a war theory basing upon the tracts so far discussed allow for a more flexible approach to the topic, avoiding fractures that would make impossible to grasp the whole deepness of today transformations. The *Vom Kriege* can still prove itself an useful and inspiring tool.

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<sup>31</sup> See: Heisbourg 2002.

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