

Unconventional Warfare: A Historical Perspective

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1. Preface

By definition, a war is fought between sovereign states, and this has become a normative concept when we talk about war. There was a historical background for this. It was the brainchild of political and intellectual leaders of the 17th and 18th centuries who sought to settle differences among people in a civilized manner, and other forms of armed conflict were severely restricted. As the years rolled on into the 20th century, however, unusual armed conflicts have steadily increased. Notwithstanding the paradigm of war between sovereign states has not yet lost its relevance. Meanwhile, the acts of terrorism committed in the United States on September 11 shook the world. Words such as “new war” and “asymmetric war” have since gained currency and have come to be used in various contexts. With these in mind, this paper will survey the history of wars between states and examine in light of these developments the significance that unconventional warfare takes on in armed conflict as a whole.

2. What is Unconventional Warfare?

To start with, it is necessary to define the concept “unconventional warfare,” the subject of this paper, to clarify the points of argument contained herein. The antonym of unconventional warfare is conventional warfare, which means a battle between states’ regular armed forces. Therefore, unconventional warfare is a generic term that covers all military and quasi-military operations other than conventional warfare. More specifically, one dictionary lists under the heading “unconventional warfare” revolutionary wars and its constituents, subversion and guerrilla; command raids and other and special operations; terrorism and counter-terrorism. But nuclear war, and warfare in which biological and chemical weapons are used, are not included in the concept of unconventional

warfare¹. This definition of unconventional warfare makes no reference to the type of subject waging unconventional warfare. This means that unconventional war is conducted sometimes between private armies, sometimes between national armed forces and guerrilla, and sometimes even among national armed forces. The term “unconventional warfare” used in this paper is based on such a definition.

3. War between Sovereign States — Sealing Original Sin of Mankind

Given that an antonym of unconventional warfare is conventional warfare fought between states’ regular armed forces, the term of reference applicable to discuss unconventional warfare is war between sovereign states. In that context, war between states is treated as a normative concept. Therefore, unconventional warfare cannot be meaningfully discussed without referring to past wars fought between states.

Typical wars between states as we know them are sovereign’s wars fought in the 17th and 18th centuries and national wars that started from the Napoleonic Wars and were ended with World War I.

As is well known, mankind had overcome the ghastly religious wars by virtue of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, and this paved the way for the advent of sovereign states. According to the oft-quoted definition of Max Weber, one of the essential characteristics of the state is that it upholds a claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force over a prescribed territory. Means of physical force that had proliferated in society prior to the advent of sovereign states were concentrated in state, and its use was monopolized by state. Agents of exerting force on behalf of state were its police and armed forces. The term “armed forces” refers to a state’s regular forces. By defining the state’s armed forces as the sole legitimate agent for carrying out war, armed conflict that might be called the original sin of mankind was enclosed. In reality, it required a slow-paced historical process for a state to complete the monopolization of physical violence and empower only the state’s armed forces

¹ Edward Luttwak and Stuart L. Koehl, *The Dictionary of Modern War* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1991), 640-641.

to use it. For all that, however, the state's armed forces have become an organ for employment of physical violence with the highest legitimacy so far².

(1) War in the Age of Dynasties

Relations among states in the age of dynasties had a strong coloring of personal relationships among sovereigns and wars between them had the appearance of a game between sovereigns. The issues which principally gave rise to war were mainly royal succession, and sovereigns, the parties to the war, did not harbor strong hatred or enmity against each other. They weighed the importance of the object of war — the succession to the throne or territory — against the cost of continuing the war, and made peace with one another at an appropriate time³. In reality, however, dynasties in those days did not have sufficient wherewithal to finance a war. In the 18th century, absolute monarchy appeared, but to view absolute monarch of those days as that who had absolute power as we perceive it today is misreading the reality. In those days, the power of a state did not permeate as far as the bottom of the social scale as it does today, and monarchical governments could not mobilize all the resources of the country. This is simply because the people in those days did not have the consciousness as a nation. Therefore, they viewed war as a struggle between sovereigns, remained indifferent to it and did not deliver of their own volition resources needed to execute the war⁴. There were substantial constraints on military strength. Not to speak of military technological limitations, sovereigns had to contend with strong socio-political constraints more than anything else. Needless to say, monarchical governments had no way to conscript people into armed forces, and the standing army they maintained was largely composed of hired professionals, not native citizen-soldiers. Early in the 17th century, a professional standing army came into being in the Netherlands, and the country could create it with the wherewithal it had obtained through maritime trade.

² Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³ Evan Luard, *War in International Society* (New Haven, US: Yale University Press, 1987), 85-118.

⁴ R. R. Palmer, Frederic the Great, "Guibert, Bulow: From Dynastic to National War," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 92.

With sufficient funding, the Netherlands was able to maintain the standing army by regularly paying to its soldiers throughout the year. King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden and then France created standing armies modeled on that of the Netherlands, and professional standing armies paid for out of treasury funds were established directly under the command of the sovereign. Those standing armies were structured in a state's bureaucratic system, and were subject to strict discipline⁵. As the professional standing army was made up of paid professional soldiers, its maintenance entailed large costs, necessarily making sovereigns hesitant to start a war rashly.

Moreover, one should not overlook the fact that the international system then in existence had conditions restraining sovereigns from plunging into a fierce war. In the course of the disintegration of *respublica christiana*, a number of states emerged, creating an appearance of an anarchical international system. In reality, however, it was anything but anarchy. In those days, the French language was used widely at royal courts, and a cosmopolitan society of European aristocrats sharing common values, language, lifestyle and blood relationships existed. Within the framework of such a common world, a balance of power developed. During war, the distinction between the realm of public and that of private was honored, and there was an unwritten rule that war should not disturb civil society, a private domain that started to take shape in those days. As a result, commerce, travel and cultural and scholarly exchanges even with an enemy country continued almost unimpeded. In those days, there were no passports and visas, and citizens of all countries were allowed to cross national boundaries. With the advent of nations, the situation changed.

(2) National War

National war began in the French Revolution that started toward the end of the 18th century and ended early in the 19th century. Relations among states up to that time had been governed by diplomatic customs, and wars were conducted by professional standing armies commanded by aristocrats hired from various countries. However, when political society changed, the nature of war had

⁵ Gunther E. Rothenberg, "Maurice of Nassau, Gustavus Adolphus, Raimondo Montecuccoli, and the 'Military Revolution' of the Seventeenth Century" in Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 32-63.

necessarily to change with it. As a king was dethroned and the people became the supreme ruler, “nation,” the situation changed drastically. The state has become the instrument that serves some sort of abstract cause such as equality, freedom, revolution or nationalism. The state of France is a classic example of this. When the people can find a value in the state that is worthy of their sacrifice to defend it, they voluntarily offer human and material resources to prosecute a war. In the 19th century, issues for which states frequently went to war were territorial claims and the enlargement of the sphere of influence, and they were closely linked to rising nationalism. Underlying such developments was the fact that national war had necessarily to become furious, and that war between sovereigns had become to appear stupid looking and anachronistic. In fact, national war was so fierce that it moved Karl von Clausewitz, the author of *On War (vom Kriege)*, to conceive the idea of “Absolute War” as an ideal type. The advent of nation-states led him to establish a prescribed doctrine of the trinity of government, state’s armed forces and nation. In fact, what prompted him to write *On War* was the great shock he got from the French military of those days. It appeared to him that the French military was a giant body of partisan armed forces that did not observe the traditional customs of war. Clausewitz — and for that matter, some members of military officer corps of Prussia — perceived that the secret of the strength of the French military of those days could not be explained merely by military technique (organization of divisions, etc.). In other words, he saw the emergence of armed forces made up of native citizens, not professional soldiers who were merely hired for payment, and realized that to counter the French Army, Prussia must build a national army composed of native people⁶. Although the efforts of some of its officers did not immediately come to fruition on account of the arrival of the Restoration after the settlement of Vienna in 1815, the door to the era of national army, once opened, was not closed entirely. Nationalist movements gathered strength throughout the 19th century, and one continental country after another introduced a short-term conscription system in earnest in the second half of the century with the result that mass armies emerged. And this movement coincided with the entrance of the

⁶ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and The State* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).

populace on the political stage. In this mass movement age, nationalism gathered strength sharply, and when a mass army joins forces with such hyper-nationalism, war necessarily becomes fiercer. As war thus became a people-to-people war, not one between sovereigns as it had been, dialectical mechanism of power worked: state's power infiltrated into the deep bottom of the civil society, and the people also cooperated with the state from the bottom, enabling the state to mobilize the nation's resources almost without limits. Citizens of an enemy became enemy aliens, no longer partners in trade or cultural exchange. A case in point is the World War I, which was escalated to a total war that made no distinction between the front line and the home front.

So far, we have surveyed wars in the age of sovereigns that typified war between states and national wars of the 19th century. While these two types of war differed widely depending on whether they had the backing of nationalism. On the other hand, they had some essential points in common in that they abided by the principle — that only the armed forces of a state recognized as a member of the international community by other countries can engage in a war. It was in the 20th century after World War I that many incidents of unconventional warfare erupted.

4. Armed Conflicts in the 20th Century

(1) Struggle Centering around Ideology and Political System

When viewed from a historical standpoint, the 19th century ended and the 20th century started with World War I. As dramatized by the fall of illustrious dynasties of Europe - such as the house of Hohenzollern, the house of Hapsbburg, and the house of Romanov - brought about by the shock of an all-out war, and by the intervention of an outsider, i.e. the United State which brought the war to a conclusion , the era of Europe came to an end. The world also witnessed the emergence of the Soviet Union in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution.

From our perspective, we Japanese really feel that many wars were fought between the regular armed forces of states until World War II, but the feeling about war varies from country to country. As the Bolshevik Revolution, which occurred toward the end of World War I, dramatically illustrates, the 20th century

was an era of ideology, and when viewed in terms of a normative concept implied in the concept of conventional war, it was an unusual century littered with highly partisan armed conflicts. The anomaly can also be seen in the fact that the Red Army of the Soviet Union was the armed forces not of the state but of the Communist Party. Although Nazi Germany, a major belligerent in World War II, had taken the form of a state, it was, in political reality, nothing more than a state “hijacked” by a peculiar political party called “the Nazis.” The peculiarity of the Nazis is obvious from the fact that it possessed private armies - the brown-shirted *Sturmabteilung* (SA) and the black-shirted *Schutzstaffel* (SS meaning bodyguards). Armed conflicts that were of strongly partisan-oriented nature increased sharply during the Cold War era. Characteristic of armed conflicts in the 20th century was that they were strongly partisan-oriented and points of contention that led to armed conflict often had to do with struggles for ideology and political systems. Those that led to armed conflicts - such as territorial disputes and the enlargement of spheres of influence that had occurred frequently in the 17th century through the 19th century - decreased. The struggle for enlargement of spheres of influence, if anything, was synonymous with a geopolitical enlargement of ideologies⁷. As Carl Schmitt, a German legal scholar, for one, predicted an increase in partisan war, it was natural that the instances of unconventional warfare as typified by revolutionary wars should have increased in such an era⁸.

(2) Unconventional Warfare in the Cold War Era — Revolutionary War

Guerrillas and commandos raids into a hostile country, constituents of unconventional warfare, had occurred from olden times. The word “guerrilla” derived its origin from a Spanish word “*guerrilleros*,” which means a small war, and the first guerrilla war occurred on the Iberian Peninsula during the Napoleonic Wars early in the 19th century⁹. Special operations such as commandos raids were conducted in rear areas of enemy lines during World War

⁷ Luard, *War in International Society*, 119-127.

⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Theorie des Parisanen: Zwischenbemerkung zum Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Verlag Duncker & Humblot, 1963).

⁹ Franklin D. Margiotta, ed., *Brassey's Encyclopedia of Land Forces and Warfare* (Washington: Brassey's, 2000), 1087.

II.

However, they differed from the unconventional warfare under discussion. The guerrilla war waged against foreign troops (the French Army) on the Iberian Peninsula had a strong tinge of spontaneous insurrection rooted in the popular antagonism of the local people against the invader. The special operations conducted during World War II had, no matter how highly they were praised for their heroism, the subsidiary character of supporting the regular forces' operation within the framework of a war between belligerent states. On the other hand, many of unconventional warfare during the Cold War era were carried out in the context of a revolutionary war that was accompanied by an extremely fierce partisan rivalry for a political system in a developing country. As the word "revolutionary war" clearly implies, it is a civil war and differs from a war conducted by the regular armed forces of states. In the case of many developing countries, unlike Western countries where states had evolved without external intervention in the course of their long history since the 17th century, a Western-style state was grafted onto their indigenous political soils that had formed in a long history different from that of the Western. Therefore, it is only natural that the grafted state should be fragile. Civil wars erupted frequently there while nation- building dragged on. Such fragility of government caused political turmoil and, if aggravated, armed conflicts that took the form of unconventional warfare.

The U.S. armed forces intervened in the Vietnam War in support of South Vietnam. While the U.S. armed forces were a state's regular armed forces, their adversary, the Viet Cong, which slipped into the general population and carried out subversion, terrorism and guerrilla warfare, was not the regular armed forces of the state, and did not observe the rules of state-to-state war. Although North Vietnam, the real enemy, did not apparently go to war with the United States, it in effect entered the Vietnam War through infiltration. External powers such as China and the Soviet Union lent support to North Vietnam but did not at all enter the war officially. North Vietnam and the external powers supporting it carried out a revolutionary war by creating an ambiguous and uncertain situation in South Vietnam where there was no distinction between peace and war. As revolutionary wars are conducted in an extremely politicized environment, officers of the state's regular armed forces who have become accustomed to

conventional missions that are clearly set apart from political and social factors, especially those of the U.S. armed forces who value the tradition of military professionalism, found unconventional warfare beyond their capacity and were averse to it. During the Cold War era, the United States and the Soviet Union had sought to build deterrence by producing a large number of nuclear arsenals, and their leaders strained every nerve not to cross the threshold of nuclear deterrence. They conceived the idea of, and have carefully made preparations for, conventional war to the extent not exceeding the threshold of nuclear deterrence. Such conventional war was dubbed as “a limited war.” The conventional war many U.S. armed forces officers thought about and made preparations for was mainly one that might have been fought in Europe. It may be said that unconventional warfare was carefully carried out in a space where peace and war were not distinguishable below the threshold of conventional warfare¹⁰. There was no nuclear war during the Cold War era in the end. Conventional wars did occur in the Middle East and between India and Pakistan, but the United States and the Soviet Union have never fought directly each other. On the other hand, unconventional war was actual warfare that directly involved the United States and other advanced countries of Western Europe. It may be said that unconventional war was an anathema to the armed forces of Western countries. How officers of a state’s armed forces, especially those of the United States, were averse to unconventional warfare was evident in their attitude toward the Special Operations Forces (SOF). To deal with unconventional warfare, it is necessary to create SOF and run them under an integrated command. In reality, however, the United States had started making preparations for them in earnest as late as in the 1980s, and it was in 1987 that it created the post of assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low intensity conflict and the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). Susan L. Marquis, the author of a book that traced the history of the SOF and USSOCOM, said, the so-called mainstream officers of the three services of the U.S. armed forces had little understanding about, nor sympathy for, their SOF. On the contrary, as the organizational culture of the SOF was so apart from that of the mainstream

¹⁰ Stephen J. Cimbala, *The Politics of Warfare-The Great Powers in the Twentieth Century* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 85-86.

organization, they considered the SOF as a heresy and it was not so easy to create a central command for the SOF in such a climate¹¹. Be that as it may, the Cold War ended shortly after the USSOCOM was created, and the world has entered the post-Cold War era.

5. The Significance of Unconventional Warfare in Post-Cold War Era

Many of armed conflicts that stood out after the end of the Cold War were ethnic conflicts in so-called “failed states.” The form they took was far apart from the war between a state’s regular forces that we consider a standard form since the formation of modern states. In those conflicts, the trinity of government, a state’s armed forces and the nation formalized by Clausewitz did not exist. There is no longer an effective government that centrally governed the country, and there were mere armed groups, not state’s armed forces. There was no nation as a political concept, and there were only people driven by passion and hatred. As was shown in the case of the Kosovo conflict, armed forces of advanced countries had no choice but to intervene in such an ethnic conflict. Other situations in which the armed forces of advanced countries are called into action include countermeasures against international drug trafficking or piracy. Then came the shocking terrorism on September 11, and the U.S. armed forces and those of its allies have mounted an attack on the Taliban. All of the cases mentioned above are situations where unconventional wars were fought. True, conventional weapons, such as cruise missiles, bombers and aircraft carriers, were mobilized for the onslaught on the Taliban, giving the appearance similar to conventional warfare. On the other hand, operations aimed at chasing or hunting down Osama bin Laden on a personal basis, the moving spirit of the recent terrorism reminiscent of the Middle Ages were executed by the special operations forces. We saw a number of unconventional wars during the Cold War, but those after the Cold War are different from those in the Cold War era. Unconventional wars of the Cold War era were fought in the context of confrontation between the U.S. and Soviet camps, and this means that they were

¹¹ Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare- Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington D.C; Brookings Institution Press, 1997).

after all instruments for struggle between states. On the other hand, many of the unconventional wars we have seen in recent years have been fought not in the context of struggles between states but as a form of asymmetric war between a state and a non-state actor.

Will the number of unconventional wars increase in coming years? How should we define the position of unconventional wars among armed conflicts? These are the questions we must answer.

To answer these questions, it is necessary to review what the international order should basically be. The international order as we know it is one that was built on basic units of sovereign states that have developed since the 17th century. More recently, various arguments have been brought forward about future of states, the basic units of international order. Some went so far as to expound that states were bound to decline and become extinct¹². This argument is interesting and appealing, but it will have a merit in an extra-long time span of several centuries. To be sure, in this globalization age, the state's power to effectively ensure security on its own account, not to speak of management of economy and finance, has declined. This is why international security cooperation is necessary, and the international community can cope with the situation through cooperation. To this writer, states, especially, nation states, seem to have strong life force. This is evident from the way ethnic conflicts have been brought to an end in all parts of the world. Even when the existing states failed, or when a civil war broke out, new states emerged in their place. After Yugoslavia was dismembered, new states such as Croatia and Bosnia were separated and became independent. East Timor is seeking independence from Indonesia. This may be viewed as an attempt to reorganize a state by redrawing a line separating a "failed state" into new states.

As long as human beings want to lead a peaceful and orderly life, someone has to govern them and assure their security. Sovereign state has emerged and developed as a governing institution since the 17th century. However, the present state system should not be viewed as the inevitable outcome of historical development since the decline of feudalism. According to recent studies of history, other types of governing institution, such as the Hanseatic League and

¹² Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

Italian city-states, emerged and coexisted with sovereign states and they rivaled one another for hegemony. In the process, the Hanseatic League and Italian city-states lost out, and sovereign state became a dominant form of governing institution in the end. Then a mutual recognition system (the Westphalia system), under which a state could exist as a sovereign state only when it was recognized by other sovereign states, came into being¹³. The governing institution called “state” that originated in Europe has spread across the globe, and there exist about 200 states today. In this sense, the inter-state system is a mere four centuries old. For nation state, the system of nation state is only 200 years old. Do we have an alternative to state? In reality, the governing institution called “state” is required to exist in every corner of the earth under the current system of mutual recognition of states. Wherever human beings may live, we require a state to exist there. This is our civilization. Under this civilization, the state is a legitimate monopolizer of the means of physical violence, and the state’s armed forces and the police are the only armed groups enjoying legitimacy.

When viewed from this perspective, one perceives the significance unconventional warfare will have in coming decades. When a state fails and ethnic conflict erupts, armed forces of other states whose national interests are affected or threatened intervene. Such intervention is designed to settle conflicts in such “failed states” and bring about a state effectively capable of governing the country, and unconventional warfare may be conducted depending on the situation. Armed piracy is just a crime, and in the sense that a means of physical violence - which must be legitimately monopolized by the state - has fallen into the hands of a non-state actor, it constitutes a challenge to the international community built on units of states. As the terrorist campaign conducted by Osama bin Laden is only aimed at destruction without any constructive alternative, it truly amounts to a challenge to the current civilization. Therefore, the armed forces of the United States and other states had to mount all-out anti-terrorist operations with world-wide supports. In other words, an idea of forming a coalition of armed forces of states affected by terrorism is

¹³ Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

conceivable as a collective response to meet a challenge to the inter-state system posed by various non-state entities. Here state's armed forces will carry out unconventional warfare.

Whether it is the police or the state's armed forces that deal with such a situation is immaterial. The real issue is the mobilization of the means of physical violence monopolized by the state. The question of deciding whether the police or the state's armed forces should be used is merely a matter of convenience. Generally, in a situation where a state has collapsed creating anarchy in its wake, armed forces of other states happen to be an appropriate agency to deal with such a situation.

Such being the reality, it would be wrong to think that the armed forces of a state should be prepared to deal only with unconventional warfare from now on. Rivalry among states will continue in coming years. This is evident from the fact that the geopolitical designs of the countries involved in Afghanistan's future got entangled in a whirlpool of competition for influence. As the inter-state system based on units of states will remain unchanged as an international order in coming decades, rivalry among the states will continue as before. On the other hand, when a "failed state" emerges in a region where people are in the midst of a struggle to build their own states or large-scale terrorism erupts, and when they pose a challenge to the inter-state system, other states will try to meet such a challenge in unison. A new role of armed forces to deal with such challenges is in the offing. One of the notable characteristics of the current international military situations is the growing cases of cooperation among armed forces of states in order to deal with non-state actors. Allied attack on the Taliban and the subsequent counter-terrorism, peacekeeping operations and peace enforcement operations in so-called "failed states" are cases in point. We may see a new age of "Internationalization in Military Affairs" coming around the world, in which unconventional warfare will take on a growing importance.

Such a prospect has an important practical significance. When viewed from the standpoint of building of defense capability, states will be required to strengthen their unconventional war capability by creating and improving special operations forces along with the traditional conventional war capability to deal with inter-state conflicts.