

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 61  
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 15

---

2008

# Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21st Century

Richard Norton

Rod Thornton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Norton, Richard and Thornton, Rod (2008) "Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21st Century," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 61 : No. 4 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss4/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

*American Defense* is much like the extant body of research produced by Cordesman over the last few decades. It is filled with information that is intended to be comprehensive, even encyclopedic. Yet this approach can have its drawbacks. The book's subtitle promises to discuss "the challenge of strategic overstretch" and its chapters are organized around ten specific challenges, yet the author fails to offer a sustained argument about how to grapple with them. Instead, the chapters offer program-by-program vignettes, military service-by-military service comparisons, and agency-by-agency descriptions of difficulties. Within the vignettes, comparisons, and descriptions are piecemeal solutions—some of which make an enormous amount of sense, while others smack of improvisation or are contradictory to diagnoses and solutions offered pages earlier.

Evaluating the individual parts of so massive a work is difficult. Absent expert knowledge of an extremely wide range of issues and programs, this reviewer is left to seek out those modest areas of national security where he has some competence or general insight. Here the news is largely positive. Cordesman's discussions of U.S. Navy force structure, policies, and programs seem largely sensible, even when his language is somewhat intemperate. It is hard to argue with the author's diagnoses and solutions when he uses the words of public officials and military officers, not to mention the analyses of seasoned analysts, to underpin his arguments. His account of military "transformation" is reasoned, although in my judgment Cordesman may be a bit too enamored of the promised benefits of transformation and too hopeful that the

national security establishment can overcome what is perhaps the largest problem with transformation: "It is brutally clear that strategy and planning documents that are not integrated with force planning and long-term budgets become hollow wish lists or—at the minimum—more of a problem than part of the solution."

Like many defense experts, Cordesman is not shy about offering recommendations to fix what is wrong with U.S. national security policy. In his final chapter, he offers fourteen "major changes," all of which are ambitious. Unsurprisingly, given the enormous scope of these recommendations, Cordesman offers few details about how they might be implemented.

PETER DOMBROWSKI  
*Naval War College*



Thornton, Rod. *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21st Century*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2007. 256pp. \$69.95

Asymmetric warfare, although anything but new, is among the current political-military hot topics of the day. The success of al-Qa'ida in striking the World Trade Center, and the difficulties encountered by the United States and its partner countries in achieving stability and security in Iraq and Afghanistan, has convinced some observers that those who would wage asymmetric warfare against powerful states may now have the upper hand. Other analysts, less willing to go quite so far, agree that asymmetry will be a notable facet of most military conflicts for the foreseeable future.

Unfortunately, discussions of asymmetric warfare all too often devolve into efforts to push pet programs or ideas, attack or defend political leaders, and substitute emotion for understanding. Thankfully, *Asymmetric Warfare* is cut from a different cloth. Dr. Rod Thornton, an authority on security issues at King's College London, has produced a practical and useful primer on this important subject. In doing so, he also dispels several common misconceptions, including the ideas that *asymmetric* means *unequal*, and that asymmetric warfare is solely a tool of the weak.

While asymmetric warfare can be practiced by any actor, it is the modern terrorist who creates the most concern. Thornton takes a close look at terrorists as adversaries and how "new" terrorists differ from their historical predecessors. He identifies three characteristics as particularly important: an increased degree of fervor, an increased ability to implement attacks, and an increased ability to cause mass casualties. The author takes the time to explain why these changes have occurred and how they might manifest themselves in future attacks.

Thornton does not overlook the relationship among terrorism and asymmetric warfare and strategic communication. In addition, he explores how an asymmetric opponent would seek to win a war through attacks on infrastructure and the use of deception, electronic warfare, and psychological operations. Each of these issues is dealt with in some detail.

*Asymmetric Warfare* is not a perfect book. A deeper discussion of historical examples of asymmetric warfare would have been a powerful addition to the work. It may also be that Thornton

overstates the vulnerabilities of some of the unmanned systems he examines. However, these flaws are minor at best. *Asymmetric Warfare* is a valuable addition to current security-related literature. It is especially useful for readers new to the field who are seeking a cogent and readable description of asymmetric warfare, its various facets and aspects, and potential methods that might be used to deal with asymmetric foes.

RICHARD NORTON  
Naval War College



Kamphausen, Roy, and Andrew Scobell, eds. *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*. Carlisle, Pa.: Army War College, 2007. 582pp. (Information about free copies can be obtained at [www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs).)

This edited volume combines high-level inquiry into the larger purposes and dimensions of People's Liberation Army (PLA) reforms with fresh data that are difficult to find elsewhere. Its overall theme, the likely future dimensions and missions of China's military, is addressed in contributions from leading experts in the field.

The chapters, organized by service, are solidly grounded in Chinese sources and knowledge of Chinese organizations. In a characteristically sound overview of China's national military strategy, David Finkelstein is scrupulous in his explanation of the relative authority of various Chinese military documents. Evan Medeiros assesses that while Chinese nuclear doctrine has become increasingly sophisticated (while remaining opaque to foreign analysts, particularly in the