



## Introduction

I begin with an assertion that seems difficult to refute and that represents the line of argument of this article, stating that war, despite the evolution of society, continues to be one of the phenomena that continues to condition the international system and that it is necessary to adapt to its new dimension. A quick "horizon scan" -Ukraine, the Middle East, Yemen, etc.- is enough to identify armed conflicts which, although with different characteristics, continue to respond to the constituent elements of war referred to by Bouthoul:<sup>1</sup> their political nature, insofar as they pit groups with different and opposing objectives against each other; their legal constraints that regulate their necessity (*ius ad bellum*) and their limitations (*ius in bello*); and the fact that they are the most spectacular manifestation of violence. In this initial reflection, we must also mention other manifestations of armed struggle, such as the violence associated with international terrorism or even transnational organized crime, which Mary Kaldor calls the "*new wars*."<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, I consider it appropriate to draw the reader's attention to the uncertainty that dominates an international context that could be defined as the "*paradigm of complexity*," in which solutions to security problems must go beyond the rational, in Freedman's words,<sup>3</sup> meaning the need to overcome binary *options* -zero-sum solutions- in order to delve into an adaptive approach based on what is known as fuzzy logic. Accordingly, war and peace should not be considered as two adversarial situations, but rather as a continuum that would respond to Gray's model of "*peace with security*"<sup>4</sup>. It is precisely the situation of non-war, but without security, that defines what is known as "*gray zone conflicts*," which are so conditioning international security today.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the guiding question of this study is whether the innovative concept of asymmetry of the 1990s, which was the catalyst for the strategic model of *the "revolution in military affairs,"* (RMA) is still valid in this third decade of the 21st century or, on the contrary, needs to be redefined. In order to answer this question, after a brief consideration of the nature of armed conflict, I propose to analyze the model of wars in an environment of

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<sup>1</sup> BOUTHOU, Gaston. 1984. Tratado de Polemología. Ediciones Ejército. Madrid, Spain

<sup>2</sup> KALDOR, Mary. 2012. New and Old Wars. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK

<sup>3</sup> FREEDMAN, Lawrence. 2016 (eBook). Strategy: A History. La Esfera de los Libros. Madrid, Spain

<sup>4</sup> BAYLIS, John; WIRTZ, James J.; GRAY, Colin S. 2016. Strategy in the Contemporary World. Oxford University Press. Oxford, UK.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this article, gray zone conflicts are understood to be deliberate and sustained confrontations by state or non-state actors that employ ambiguous, covert, or non-attributable tactics with the aim of achieving strategic advantages without clearly crossing the threshold of formal war.

chaos, which characterizes the model of global conflict today, to identify the fundamental elements that condition asymmetric combat today.

**Nature and evolution of war**

When we refer to war, the first thing that should be addressed is its very nature in order to determine whether it is a continuous or discontinuous phenomenon. War as a socio-political fact has a clear attribute of continuity, as Clausewitz himself pointed out in his work "On War," defining it as "a political act, an act of will, and an act of violence." These three circumstances are present in all armed conflicts, past and present, but it would be a very limited analysis if we did not consider other factors that are precisely what give it its discontinuous dimension. In this case, we are referring to the technical-military aspects that make up the characteristics of armed conflicts: actors, scenarios, weaponry, capabilities, procedures, etc.

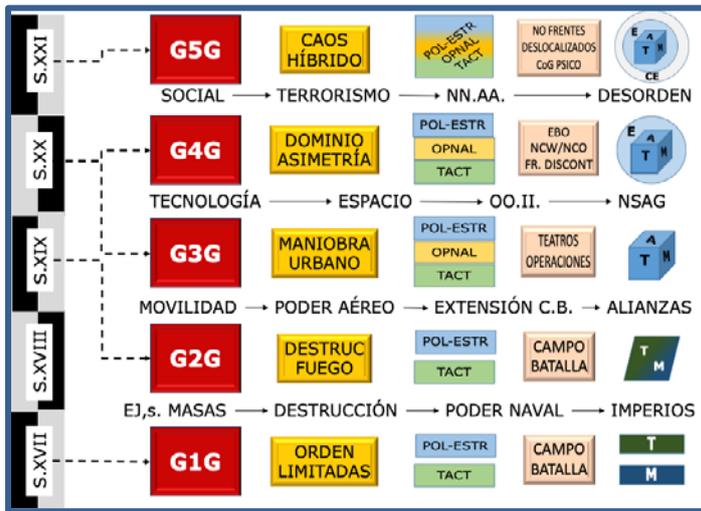


Figure1 . Evolution of wars. Own elaboration

In a schematic way, we could establish the five socio-military revolutions mentioned below, which have given rise to different models of war and even to a reconfiguration of the international system itself. The first of these RMAs., was the emergence of the modern state after the Peace of Westphalia; the second was the French Revolution and subsequent Industrial Revolution,

which paved the way for World War I and its corollary in the Second World War; the third those that were generated by the world order during the Cold War; its disappearance after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union paved the way for the fourth revolution in military affairs; the fifth being the new world order that took shape in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Thus, in this evolutionary process described above, different models of warfare have emerged which, beyond the different semantics used, are commonly referred to as first, second, third, fourth, and fifth generation warfare, each with its own particularities and characteristics in relation to the environment or context in which they take place, the levels

of command of operations, the procedures, and the areas in which they are carried out. It is precisely in fourth-generation wars that capabilities as a means of achieving strategic advantage are beginning to take hold, with the term "asymmetric" being used for wars and conflicts, strategies, and threats.

Be that as it may, what is indisputable is that wars have changed profoundly, regardless of whether they are fought between different states or within them between armed groups of different kinds. Industrial-era wars -the traditional confrontation between states- are increasingly rare, and even when they do occur, as in the case of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, their characteristics and procedures are radically different from the traditional model. This is even more evident in the case of more complex conflicts in which states face non-state armed groups, such as Israel in its fight against the terrorist organizations Hamas or Hezbollah, supported by Iran. In this new and uncertain context, some authors refer "new wars" highlighting the distinction between war -understood as violence between states or armed groups organized for political reasons- organized crime -violence carried out by private groups with normally economic objectives- and large-scale human rights violations -violence by states or armed groups against individuals- becomes blurred<sup>6</sup>.

Furthermore, in this worrying manifestation of war, aspects that were once unquestionable, such as the use of force, are being radically transformed, with the emphasis placed on its usefulness rather than its legitimacy, as Rupert Smith does in his book *The Utility of Force*. Or the importance of the human terrain, to the detriment of the traditional physical terrain, and its consequence on the importance acquired by the cognitive dimension in conflicts.

*"War no longer exists. There are, of course, confrontations, conflicts, and fighting all over the world (...) and states still have armed forces that they use as symbols of power. (...) War as a contest on the battlefield between men and machinery, war as a great decisive event in a dispute over international affairs, that war no longer exists."*<sup>7</sup>

Although war no longer exists, as the British general mentioned above refers to, this

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<sup>6</sup> KALDOR. Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> SMITH, Rupert. 2006. *The Utility of Force* (P. 1). *The Art of War in the Modern World*. Penguin Books. London, UK

violent phenomenon is still present today and is even more complex, if possible. In fact, it is increasingly difficult to limit internal or localized conflicts in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. Wars in this third decade of the century generate thousands of transnational connections, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between internal and external, between aggression (attacks from outside) and repression (attacks from within the country), or even between the local and the global.

In addition to the transnationalization of armed conflict mentioned above, there are the effects of privatization, the emergence of private military companies in activities previously exclusive to the armed forces, the use of cyberspace as the fifth dimension of warfare, and robotization, with the appearance of semi-autonomous devices on the battlefield.

These new wars require comprehensive strategies to confront them, strategies that go beyond the use of force and involve the integrated use of political, diplomatic, police, judicial, and other actions carried out beyond the battlefields and conflict zones.

"War is no longer confined to the military sphere; the course of war can be changed by political, economic, diplomatic, cultural, and technological factors."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, when talking about fifth-generation warfare, its hybrid nature seems clear, understanding that this term aptly contemplates how the public and private, the state and non-state, the formal and informal, the local and global, etc., are blurred. If we recall that the concept of asymmetry emerged in the 1990s, it is worth asking whether it continues to apply to armed conflict in the 21st century, which is discussed below.

### **The concept of asymmetry in chaotic environments**

When reviewing the concept of asymmetry, we should begin by saying that it is a term that, at the very least, lacks clarity. To better understand it, we could try to answer the following questions: Is it limited to a confrontation between forces with different capabilities and technology? Are we dealing with a new concept or, on the contrary, is it something that has been a historical constant? Is this approach still valid today and, if so, how does it manifest itself?

The first two questions are not particularly difficult or controversial to answer, insofar as

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<sup>8</sup> PINTADO, Cesar 2014. "On Asymmetric Warfare" DO 55/2014 Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE). Madrid, Spain.

it can be said that asymmetric conflict goes beyond a mere confrontation between forces of different sizes and capabilities. Otherwise, it could include virtually all the wars that have taken place throughout history: the Spanish people against the Napoleonic invaders, the American independence fighters who waged an irregular war against the British infantry, or more recently, the Vietnamese communists against the great American power, and the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, to name a few of the best known. In all of them, we can identify the existence of "a David and a Goliath" and, as in the biblical story, it was not always the latter who was the victor, at least in absolute terms.

The answer to the third question could be more difficult, and in order to answer it properly, at least these three parameters should be taken into account: the way in which war has evolved, the environment in which armed conflicts occur, and the main multipliers/determinants of asymmetry.

The first of these—the evolution of warfare—has already been addressed in the previous point, establishing the framework of fourth-generation warfare as the starting point for asymmetry, particularly during the First Gulf War in 1991, in which a coalition of countries led by the United States defeated the Iraqi army and forced Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait, a country he had occupied by force.<sup>9</sup> Asymmetric warfare was then explained by the victors as "a set of operational practices that aim to deny the advantages and exploit the vulnerabilities of the adversary rather than seek direct confrontation." At that time, the fundamental factor conditioning asymmetry was undoubtedly the immense technological superiority of the United States over any of its potential adversaries. This American worldview is clearly expressed in the words of Ronald F. Fogelman<sup>10</sup> :

"America has not only the opportunity but the obligation to move from wars of annihilation and attrition that put thousands of young Americans at risk (...) to a concept that relies on our sophisticated military capabilities to achieve US objectives by applying what I like to refer to as a strategy of asymmetric force."

However, this asymmetric model, based almost exclusively on technological power, would soon raise some red flags among Western strategists, who pointed out the risks that hostile actors could use asymmetric means to attack their own vital interests. We can

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<sup>9</sup> HERMAN, Paul F. 1997. Asymmetric Warfare. Seizing the Threat. *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement* 6(1), 176–183.

<sup>10</sup> United States Air Force General during a conference entitled: "A New American Model of Warfare"

see, that in a short time the concept of asymmetry was broadening. At the dawn of this new century, Colin S. Gray considered asymmetric warfare to be *"a method that is difficult to define but is based on the unusual, the unexpected, and procedures that are not easily countered by conventional forces and methods."*

This prescient statement would be brought to life by Al Qaeda with its terrorist attacks in the heart of the United States, the world's great power, in September 2001. From that moment on, what was called *the "global war on terror"* began, which has been the cause and consequence of various conflicts (Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, etc.), in which it has been demonstrated that asymmetry as it was conceptualized did not respond to the characteristics of these wars.

In relation to the environment in which the conflict is taking place, the second of the parameters cited for analyzing the evolution of asymmetry, it should be noted that disorder and chaos are two of the main hallmarks of today's wars (Figure 1), which is that positions context as the main differentiating factor in today's asymmetric model, insofar as none of the contenders has the necessary conditions to exercise dominant control.

Before moving forward, it is important to understand chaos in relation to armed conflict. In the field of systems theory, chaos does not imply absolute disorder, but rather the existence of an underlying non-linear order, characterized by sensitivity to initial conditions and the impossibility of accurately predicting long-term behavior (Lorenz, 1993)<sup>11</sup>. Complex adaptive systems -such as international security- are made up of multiple interdependent actors whose interactions generate emerging dynamics that are not always controllable and in which small stimuli can produce disproportionate responses.

In today's wars, especially in asymmetric conflicts, this chaotic environment manifests itself in the multiplicity of actors (state and non-state), the overlapping of dimensions (military, economic, informational, cybernetic), and the volatility of alliances. Thus, the *"stimulus-response"* model, on which equilibrium in a chaotic environment is based, is distorted, in that the system's response is neither proportional nor linear but can be amplified or mutate in unexpected directions due to positive feedback and interaction with other variables in the environment. Figure 2 schematically shows the components,

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<sup>11</sup> Lorenz, Edward. N. 1993. *The Essence of Chaos*. Seattle University of Washington Press.

mechanisms, and factors that influence a chaotic system and how the former condition it, while the mediators allow for its modulation.

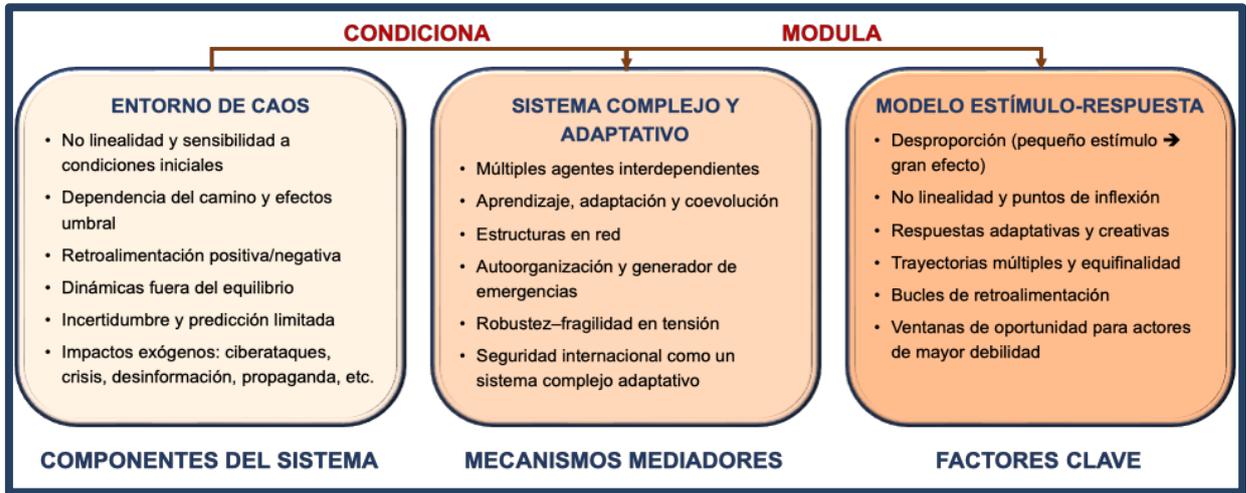


Figure2 . Diagram of chaos. Own elaboration

Returning to the aforementioned "stimulus-response" model, it is necessary to conceptualize it within the framework of battlefield management, that is, to establish where and how we apply a certain effort to gain an advantage over the adversary, denying them the necessary freedom of action and forcing them to fight in very unfavorable

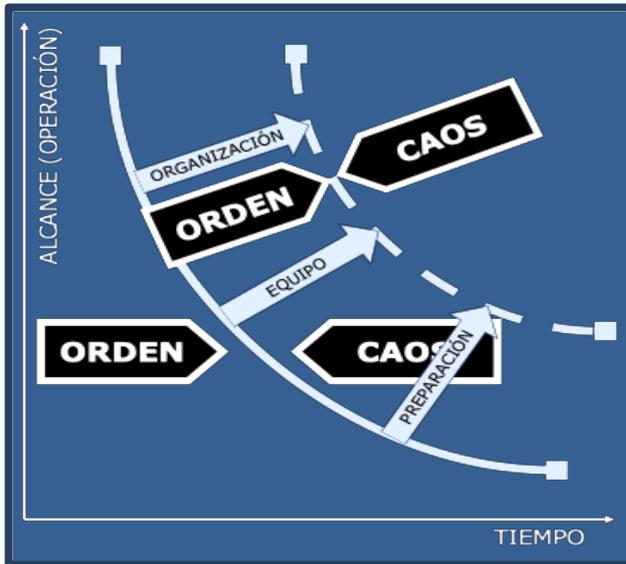


Figure3 . Order and chaos. Own elaboration

conditions. As already explained, asymmetric conflict focused almost exclusively on technological superiority, which allowed for effective network operations, exploiting strategic advantages -dominance- on the battlefield.

The key to understanding this model of relationship between the contenders lies in establishing the difference between order and disorder, which could be identified as the "frontier of chaos." Figure 3 shows how two of the nodal elements of military

operations, tempo<sup>12</sup> and range<sup>13</sup>, can lead to disorder if they are not properly evaluated and controlled. Thus, the frontier of chaos arises from the interaction between both variables: a high tempo and a controlled scope contribute to obtaining an operational or strategic advantage, while if both or some of them are out of sync, they lead to a loss of initiative, causing a condition of disorder. The image shows this relationship between order and disorder, understanding that improving capabilities (organization, doctrine, resources, and technology) allows the boundary of chaos to be shifted.

Once the direct relationship between order and capabilities is accepted, it seems clear that the frontier of chaos cannot be the same for different opponents. In the following illustration (Figure 4), we can see how contender A has a wider zone of order and, as a result, will gain an advantage by forcing the adversary to fight in the shaded area. This situation could be likened to conflicts such as the First Gulf War, in which the Allied superiority was so evident that the stimulus-response model allowed the desired effects to be achieved. The problem with applying this model to new wars is that it is not easy to establish a clear boundary between order and chaos for different adversaries. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were clearly superior to

the armed groups of Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon War or Hamas in the current conflict in Gaza; apparently the capabilities of the Russian armed forces allowed them to quickly occupy and control Ukraine in February 2022; the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 returned control of the country to the Taliban regime after nearly 20 years of war and one of the greatest military efforts for its reconstruction. In all of these cases, the supposedly weaker contenders achieved a strategic victory.

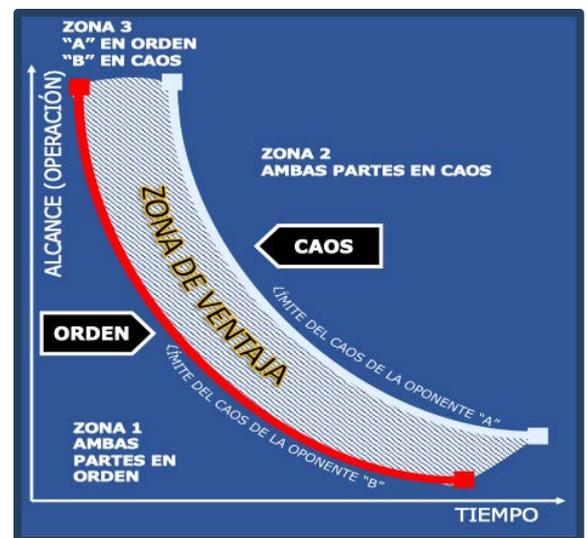


Figure4. Zone of advantage. Own elaboration

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<sup>12</sup> The tempo of operations refers to the speed, cadence, and synchronization with which military actions are executed in relation to the adversary's decision-making and adaptation capabilities. A superior tempo allows one to impose one's own initiative, overwhelm enemy command cycles, and maintain constant pressure; conversely, a tempo that is too slow facilitates the opponent's reorganization and response.

<sup>13</sup> The scope of operations is understood as the depth and breadth of the effects generated at different levels of command (tactical, operational, strategic). It includes both spatial projection (from local to regional or global) and intensity and impact in terms of resources committed, dimensions involved (land, sea, air, cyber, information), and objectives pursued. A greater scope multiplies interactions and complexity, increasing the probability of entering the zone of disorder.

It is therefore worth asking what the reasons might be for the border of chaos not being uniform in new wars. Gray, in his work *Strategy for Chaos*, offers some considerations in this regard. One of them corresponds to the nonlinear effects that characterize them, in which non-decisive actions have disproportionate strategic effects, contributing to the greater relevance of chaos. Another noteworthy aspect is the fact that wars are always fought by and for societies, with the human factor being irreplaceable. Smith also expresses this when he refers to "war among the people," stating that in such wars, people fight among themselves, against each other, and to defend each other.

*"War between people is one in which operations take place in the midst of the population, with combatants and non-combatants intermingling, and in which the key to victory lies in winning the support of that same population, rather than in the military defeat of the adversary."<sup>14</sup>*

In this new, more complex scenario, the opposing forces are radically different in nature, and consequently, their lines of action and strategies are very distant from each other. Returning to the Cartesian model of time and scope, we can see how these factors generate different oscillations between order and chaos, and consequently, the "zones of

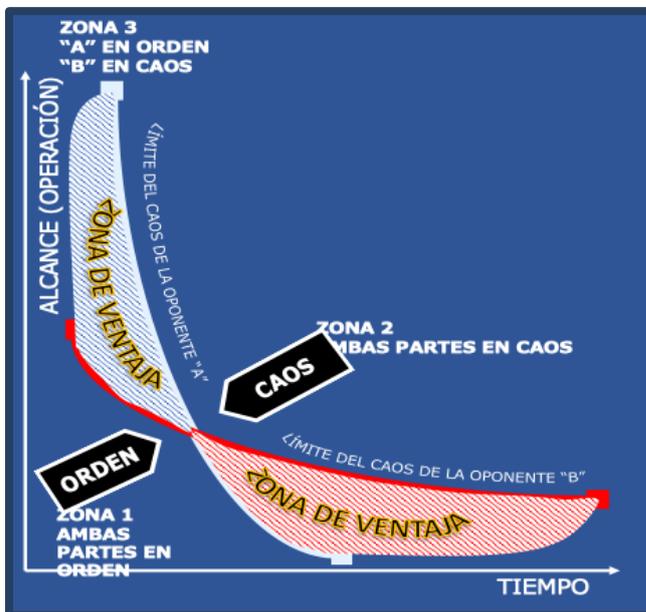


Figure 5. Asymmetry and chaos. Own elaboration

advantage" are not uniform. It is unlikely that the lines marking the boundaries between order and chaos will cross, as was the case in the previous situation. In the situation described for this model of asymmetric conflict, an adequately sized military force could be capable of conducting a large-scale operation to which a potentially weaker adversary, such as an insurgent force, could not respond adequately with any guarantee of success. On the contrary, these groups

have the capacity to carry out short-range actions in a very short time. This suggests that in an asymmetric environment, the "limits of chaos" for the two contenders can be crossed, creating two zones in which each party has an advantage. In this scenario, the

<sup>14</sup> SMITH. Ibid.

better equipped and trained contender will not always win the battle, let alone the war.

Now it may be easier to understand that what really changes is not war itself but the context in which it takes place, and therefore it will be particularly important to analyze the factors that shape it. Controlling this frontier of chaos does not depend solely on the military pace or the scope of conventional operations, but on the constant interaction of various factors that alter the areas of advantage between opponents, generating a continuous alternation between chaos and order. Asymmetric conflict does not stray from its essential logic, which is none other than to exploit advantages over the adversary, but it is necessary to understand that it currently requires a new approach to the phenomenon of war, assuming a more flexible approach, a clear definition of the political objective, the adaptation of capabilities and procedures to its new characteristics, and paying preeminent attention to the human factor, avoiding overvaluing technology.

### **The determining factors of the new model of asymmetry**

Let us now address the third of the parameters proposed in the previous section on the need to review the concept of asymmetry, that is, the determining factors and multipliers, and thereby answer the question of how it manifests itself in today's wars. It could be argued that the model has been radically transformed, at least that is the thesis I propose, to the point that I would dare to introduce the term "*reverse asymmetry*" to express that it far exceeds the technological gap, incorporating other elements that contribute to shaping the frontiers of chaos between the contenders in the wars of the third decade of the 21st century. Many factors could be identified that could be considered multipliers of the environment of chaos that characterizes today's global conflict, but for the purposes of this text, the following are highlighted: terrain, actors, limitations, alliances, and procedures.

- *Terrain*. Military operations have traditionally been associated with the conquest of territory, either to control resources or to increase power. However, today territorial conquests have lost importance, in addition to being very low in profitability in relation to the effort they require. On the contrary, and because of wars being fought, in the words of Rupert Smith, "*among the people*," the struggle for hearts and minds, what could be called the human terrain, has taken on paramount importance.

One of the main consequences of the struggle in the human terrain is the extension of the battlefield, that is, the effects of tactical and operational actions often have strategic value, which in turn is favored by the exponential development of new social technologies. An example of this is Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip, which is generating a significant anti-Semitic reaction worldwide.

This factor can be considered a multiplier of disorder insofar as it expands the frontier of chaos, since its control becomes dominated by social and cognitive dynamics that are more difficult to measure and even more difficult to intervene in. In this context, the pace and scope of operations lose their ability to influence the frontier of chaos. A high pace of military operations can become counterproductive if it erodes legitimacy, for example, or if the scope ceases to be territorial and dominates its human component, with much more unpredictable effects.

- *Actors.* Traditionally, because of their political nature, wars have been limited to the exclusive sphere of states and, in the operational sphere, to the military. However, today it is common to find non-state organizations competing with the state and criminal groups of different kinds carrying out armed actions. On the other hand, in order to avoid the wear and tear that prolonged and sometimes emotionally distant conflicts cause on their societies, states resort to hiring what are known as private military security companies (PMSCs).

It is important to note the hybrid nature of these non-state armed groups, which adapt different roles, political and criminal, according to their interests. This is typical of terrorist groups such as Hamas, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Islamic State, etc. It is easy to find examples of this in current conflicts; in reference to the two most widely reported, Gaza and Ukraine, it is common to see Hamas leaders appear as the legitimate political leaders of their people and victims of Israeli violence. For its part, the war in Ukraine is no stranger to the vague discourse of its actors, with leaders of armed groups on both sides touting their political role or the manifest influence of CMSPs, as is the case with the well-known Wagner group on the Russian side, or the Ukrainian paramilitary group known as the Azov Battalion. Furthermore, the leaders of the parties to the conflict often forget their commitment to international law, with both Putin and Netanyahu having been condemned by international legal bodies for their systematic violations of human rights.

Thus, the diversity of actors in new wars is a key factor that multiplies the complexity of the system, reducing the ability to anticipate responses. Their proliferation, not only in number but also in nature (state, irregular, private), creates multiple parallel operational rhythms, resulting in a direct imbalance that favors disorder and chaos.

- *Limitations.* The profusion of non-state actors in the conflict, as well as the fact that new wars make the population the main victims of the conflict, creates a notable imbalance to the detriment of conventional armies, which are subject to limitations under international law that the others are not.

This situation creates a real dilemma for Western societies: the necessary moral and legal limitations versus the absence of subjection to the law and radically opposed moral constraints. Examples could be given from the various theaters of operations in which the armies of Western democracies are involved, but perhaps the most obvious is Afghanistan, where the relativity of time for the combatants was demonstrated: while the allied forces needed to end the conflict, for the Taliban insurgency, time was on their side.

These limitations introduce rigidity into the pace of operations of regular armies, which can become blocked while the adversary acts with flexibility. This gap accelerates the loss of initiative and pushes towards disorder. At this point, it is worth briefly reflecting on the risk that conventional armies may fall into the trap of using procedures like those of their irregular opponents, as is happening with the IDF with humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip, where, among other consequences, it is losing the narrative and its own legitimacy.

- *Alliances.* The loss of leadership by international security and defense organizations, coupled with the volatility of alliances, which in most cases are based on particular and short-term interests, hinders coordinated action against aggressions that alter the status quo in the international system and thus leads to greater weakness in capabilities.

It is an undeniable fact that, in recent decades, because of the lack of global leadership, there has been a worrying erosion of mutual trust, which is

compounded by the variable geometry of coalitions, further increasing uncertainty. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, the international community's weak commitment to the sovereignty of a country has become apparent. Even within the European Union itself, the necessary unity of action has not been achieved. Furthermore, NATO's cohesion is also at one of its most delicate moments, jeopardizing the Atlantic link that has been the paradigm of security in Europe for decades. On the other hand, new alliances are emerging between regimes opposed to the system of freedoms of Western society.

This situation generates worrying volatility that causes the collective pace to be irregular and coordinated reach to be reduced, detracting from control over chaos. If allies do not synchronize operations, the frontier of chaos shifts toward disorder because strategic cohesion is diluted.

- *Procedures.* The emergence of cyberspace in the traditional land, sea, and aerospace domains has made it easier for state and non-state actors to carry out high-impact actions against their adversaries, committing very few resources. On the other hand, the development of new social technologies conditions competition in the human sphere, highlighting the importance of the cognitive dimension in new wars.

This new dimension of conflict has facilitated the replacement of Peace with Non-War, a kind of peace without security in the words of Colin S. Gray. This situation favors the proliferation of conflicts in the gray zone. Examples of this include the Russian cyberattacks against Estonia in 2007; disinformation campaigns on social media in conflicts such as the one in Ukraine; and interference in electoral processes, to name a few of the most well-known.

At the operational level, these procedures open the door to what are known as hybrid wars, which involve combining, under a single command, irregular warfare actions, including terrorist attacks, with conventional ones, using high-powered weapons of destruction, as well as bringing the battlefield to urban areas, mixing with the civilian population, even using them as human shields, all supported by extensive media coverage. but the most relevant aspect is to take the effort to the psychological field to enhance the cognitive dimension of the conflict in order to turn tactical actions into strategic successes, as Hezbollah demonstrated with

great success in the aforementioned 2006 campaign on Lebanese soil.

The procedures employed radically alter the stimulus-response relationship, so that a small-scale attack can have a major impact, thereby lowering the threshold of chaos by entering the zone of disorder with smaller and faster stimuli.

## Conclusions

In summary, the above allows us to understand that current conflicts are taking place in an environment of disorder and chaos in which numerous hybrid threats are emerging, increasing their complexity even further. In these conflicts, the traditional levels of command—tactical, operational, and strategic—merge, with technological superiority losing importance and reducing the effectiveness of conventional capabilities to achieve decisive effects. In this model, which could apply to fifth-generation warfare, asymmetry has undergone a profound mutation to the point that, in many cases, strategic advantages are achieved by the weaker contenders.

In the chaotic scenario of today's wars, traditional strategies for resolving armed conflicts are of little use. Although this phenomenon retains its political nature, its regulatory and legal framework, and its violent manifestation, its characteristics are radically different and require a more adaptive and comprehensive approach. Managing chaos requires strategic resilience, operational flexibility, and a broader understanding of security that integrates the human factor, the technological dimension, and the construction of legitimacy. Only in this way it will be possible to move beyond the framework of non-war and advance toward true peace with security.

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