



Dierk Walter

Neither new or a war

Don't call the fight against terror a "war"

Acompanying the terrorist attacks on western centres, such as those that recently occurred in London, is a renewed willingness in politics and the media to describe the series of such acts, as well as retaliation to them, as "the new war". However, there are good reasons for refraining from this hasty renaming of phenomena which often are neither "new", nor "war".

The "new wars" are mostly described in such categories as the denationalization and privatization of the use of force, the undermining of the international law of warfare, and the removal of any temporal or spatial limits to the action. From this it is not difficult to see which "old" wars those who talk of "new wars" take as a point of reference: first and foremost the regulated wars between states of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; then the largely unregulated "total" wars of the twentieth century, which were nonetheless still waged between nation states; later on, the reassuringly predictable bloc confrontation of the Cold War; and lastly, to some extent at least, the conflicts in the Third World since 1945, which the West routinely, and wrongly, took to be "proxy wars" for the Cold War. So these violent conflicts of the present — which elude classification according to the familiar model — appear to be "new".

Common to the new wars above all is the fact that the parties in the conflict are no longer nation states. But it is relevant whether this criterion of "non-statehood" applies to only one side, or to both. In the first case, the concept of the "new war" aims to describe the kind of armed conflict described in political science, logically enough, as "asymmetric warfare" — when a state or alliance fights, internally or externally, against participants which are not states. It is these above all that represent the "new wars" so termed by Herfried Münkler, the Berlin political scientist. Most manifestations of political terrorism are included in this definition. But if, on the other hand, none of the parties in the conflict is a state, the concept of the "new war" often describes long-lasting struggles *within* states, mostly in the "failed states" of the Third World.

Both patterns of conflict are, however, anything but new in history. Asymmetric warfare, state versus non-state — all this is omnipresent in the context of world history, especially in the history of European empires overseas: colonial war is practically the archetype of this kind of conflict. Even in the era following the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, often described as the epoch of symmetrical, regulated state wars, war between unsymmetrical opponents has been the predominant form of conflict even for the core states of the western world — whether in the colonies or on the borders of Europe.

The Clausewitz triad

Endemic violence in areas of weak, previously non-existent statehood is far from new. Rather, everything points to a permanently high level of violence being the historical norm wherever a strong state able to monopolize the resources of power both legally and in practice is not yet — or no longer — in place. In this respect, for many countries in the Third World, but also for the areas of disintegration in the multi-ethnic empires of Europe and Asia which have collapsed since 1989, the end of the strong state has merely meant a return to the violent daily conflicts that were the norm long before the great empires of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came into being.

Ultimately, even terrorist forms of conducting a conflict are nothing new. Rather, the targeted use of symbolic acts of violence has for centuries been part of the repertoire of asymmetric patterns of confrontation in particular — from the assassins of medieval times to the anti-colonial wars after 1945.

Generally, there is no compelling case at all for terming as "war" every form of mass endemic violence, every large-scale massacre or every instance of armed gang crime. According to classical western understanding, a "war" is defined as a large-scale societal activity in which organized force is deployed in order to accomplish certain goals which are known in advance, at least in their general nature. This understanding does not go as far as to tie the concept of war to formal statehood, not even if one starts with Clausewitz: in Clausewitz's triad of state, politics, and war, every identifiable representative group using organized force can have political goals and can therefore also wage a war.

Nevertheless, there must be some lower limit for the size and organizational complexity of such a group, beyond which talk of war in the sense of the Clausewitz triad is meaningless. In the case of simple gang criminality, warlord infighting purely focused on material enrichment, and endemic violence largely detached from any identifiable war aims, this limit at any rate would seem not to have been reached.

Where then does the latest trend of talking of war whenever there has been a reasonably large-scale slaughter anywhere stem from? The reasons seem to lie in a shift of perception on the part of the general public and in the reorientation of the politics of homeland security. The end of the East-West conflict has heightened the relative significance for the national security policies of the West (and especially Germany) of violent conflicts outside the core area of the western world, just as it has for the general public all over the world.

Violent conflicts on the periphery of the western world are now increasingly seen as challenges to one's own nation. The label "war" serves then to establish both the gravity of the threat and the competence of our national security policies to deal with it. At the same time, these conflicts in the Third World now seem to be strangely unstructured and uncontrollable, which merely intensifies the challenge to our security policies even as they reorient themselves. And all this just when the confusion caused by Islamic terrorism — whose threat the West can no longer take seriously enough after 11 September 2001 — is greater than ever before.

Error of method

Added to this is the diminishing tolerance of a western populace that is increasingly disaccustomed to war in our attitudes towards losses so sustained.

Two- to three-figure casualties are nowadays seen as a heavy price for society to pay for an armed conflict. This is expressed not least in an inflation of terminology — if company-sized units collide in the Caucasus and a few dozen people are killed, this is described throughout the media as a "battle".

In security policies, as in the media, the concept of "war" must probably therefore be understood ultimately as a status label conferring gravity which serves to underline the importance of a conflict for one's own political sphere. The relevant example of such a use of the word is of course provided by the Bush administration, which insists that the United States have found themselves in a "war" against terror since "9/11".

This comfortably vague picture of war serves to sweep aside, both in domestic and in foreign politics, the rational, day-to-day relationship between ends and means. Domestically, it makes it easier to erode the legal underpinning of the state — in the cause of the alleged protection of democracy — by means of the restriction of basic rights to an extent which can only be justified by a situation of war. Externally, the "war on terror" permits the invasion of foreign states on constructed pretexts which would have been hard to communicate as grounds for war even in the scarcely war-shy nineteenth century.

It is not only political scientists who should be wary of such re-labellings. It is quite simply a methodological error to seek to measure the change in the form of a large-scale social phenomenon such as war by appealing to borderline cases, when the more natural conclusion would be to recognize that the borderline case is by definition no longer an instance of that phenomenon, and that therefore no such change has taken place! This is not a purely semantic issue: the search for "new wars", according to the internationally shared grounds of supposed global innovation, obstructs our awareness of the historical continuity of armed conflict apparent especially in the Third World, and therefore actually hampers our ability to analyze the factors specific to each case.

If social scientists respond to every outbreak of mass violence by talking of war, they needlessly propagate a vogue concept of journalists and politicians which contributes little to our understanding of concrete events, while diluting our conception of war for no good reason and, above all, giving succour to sham justifications for disproportionate counter-terror actions.

Not encouraging

Besides, to stretch the concept of war in this way is to reinforce the establishment of the notion that it is primarily our national security policies, and in the last instance our armed forces, who bear responsibility for dealing with precisely those violent conflicts in the Third World. Given the regularity with which the militaries of the West are largely overstretched with tasks such as peacekeeping and aid for construction and development, we should consider this allocation of responsibility carefully, according to the individual case. The members of the German armed forces, as well as the US troops, specialize, first and foremost, in the armed accomplishment of the aims of government policy. That may change one day, but until then, non-military politics and the police would seem to be more suitable first points of contact for the lasting resolution of armed conflicts in the Third World, as well as — incidentally — for the internal security of the West. Inflationary talk of war contributes to a militarization of politics of a kind that we should not see as desirable in a democratic state governed by the rule of law. After the London attacks, it

remains to be seen how national security policy in Britain — but also in Germany — will react to this supposedly new challenge. It is fairly likely that once again rhetoric conjuring and befitting the image of a war situation will be over-dramatized and intensified. How long an open, democratic society can retain its liberal character in such a "war", we shall see. The historical precedents, starting from the American Civil War, are not encouraging.

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