Offense and defense are inherent in the very nature of war. Indeed, they are intrinsic to any human interaction – be it sports, business, politics, tradecraft, or statecraft. While often presented as polar opposites, offense and defense constitute the essential duality that defines any contest – be it of arms, wits, or physical prowess. This duality was recognized five millennia ago.

Chinese warrior-philosopher Sun Tzu spoke of offense and defense as two primordial forces – an inextricably linked ین and یانگ, one flowing into and giving rise to the other. He also spoke of “cheng,” the “ordinary force” – symmetric, conventional, predictable, slow and plodding; and “chi,” the “extraordinary force” – asymmetric, unorthodox, fluid, agile, and lightning-fast. Their infinitely varying compositions keep the opponent off balance, while allowing the more talented practitioner to accomplish his strategic aims with minimal cost in blood and treasure. Fixation on either one at the expense of the other leads to “disharmony” and, thereby, prolongs the confrontation and risks defeat. In contrast, the skillful combination of these forces opens up boundless possibilities. It is, therefore, the true essence of the art of war: Sun Tzu believed that there were only five musical notes, five basic colors, and five basic tastes, but the variations could not all be heard, seen or tasted. As such, “There are only two kinds of battle, but the variations of the ordinary and the extraordinary are endless. They give rise to each other, like a circle without a beginning or an end – who could exhaust them all?”

Sun Tzu’s precepts transcend time and culture. For example, “chi,” the unorthodox force, applies to modern non-kinetic measures such as cyber, radio-electronics, acoustics, and biochemical. Their universal applicability was first recognized in Europe, in the wake of the futile slaughter of World War I. It took another 50 years and the human, societal and political toll of the Vietnam War for these views to gain traction in America’s war colleges and business schools. Yet in the traditional American way of war, the core belief is that battles, just like sports, are won by offensive action. Offense is enshrined among the Principles of War, following “mass” and “objective” in the hierarchy defined in the Army Field Manual 3-0 Military Operations. Defense is deemed primarily a supporting function, designed to protect a position, preserve combat power, or await relief. Barring exceptional circumstances, however, defense cannot achieve victory. Wars are won (or brought to a stalemate, as in Korea) by the offense, preferably by an overwhelming, massed force.

February 28, 2013 marked the 22nd anniversary of Operation DESERT STORM. For all but its veterans, it was merely a date on the calendar, ignored by an administration, media, and public focused on the countdown to the March 1 sequester. It is a safe bet that the 10th anniversary of the launch of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM on March 19th will likewise go largely unnoticed, overshadowed by debates over a continuing resolution, furloughs, and other domestic woes. The American people have long grown weary of the protracted struggle and meager returns on the enormous investment of blood and treasure that followed the lightning-swift toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003. Yet these two wars – separated as they are by the September 11, 2001 attacks – are germane to the topic at hand.

Operation DESERT STORM was the United States’ third asymmetric conflict since the end of World War II. In contrast with Korea and Vietnam, however, the Gulf War was a phenomenal military success. Open hostilities lasted only six weeks, with the bulk of that time devoted to the air campaign; the ground war took a brief 100 hours. The air campaign battered Iraq’s air defense system, its strategic strike capability, and its industrial, logistical, and command and control infrastructure. On the ground, U.S. and Coalition forces inflicted severe losses on Iraqi forces, quickly ejecting them from Kuwait. It was an impressive display of overwhelming military superiority – derived from quantum advances in precision targeting, information gathering, data processing, cyber and communications – all expertly applied by a professional, well-trained, all-volunteer force. America’s victory capitalized on new weaponry, synergistically combined with military prowess resurrected from the ashes of Vietnam.

Few campaigns in history have been as asymmetric in their conduct and lopsided in their outcome as DESERT STORM.
The world’s 4th largest army was defeated in less than four days. Best estimates of Iraqi casualties are that at least 25,000 Iraqi soldiers and some 15,000 civilians lost their lives. U.S. casualties were uncommonly light: 147 were killed in action and 467 wounded – with a high percentage falling to friendly fire. The troops came home to a ticker tape parade; the Armed Forces’ prestige was at a zenith unseen since 1945. Articulating the euphoria of victory, President George H.W. Bush stated: “We’ve exorcised the ghosts of Vietnam.”

Or have we?

In the eyes of many, DESERT STORM replaced the specter of a Vietnam-like “quagmire” with the unrealistic image of an antiseptic, bloodless, push button, “Nintendo war,” in which swift victory is a foregone conclusion. The complacency and hubris born of the easy victory – buoyed by the concomitant tectonic shift in the global environment resulting from the USSR’s collapse – left the American public pining for a “peace dividend” and the military unprepared for the asymmetric fights that were soon to follow.

The Coalition’s rapid success left Saddam Hussein battered and humiliated, but still in charge. Concerned with negative images of “unfair overmatch” – exemplified by the images of the so-called “Highway of Death” – the U.S. halted the offensive and allowed the Iraqis to limp from the battlefield with sufficient military strength to defeat internal threats and shore up Saddam’s grip on power. Indeed, after the cease-fire was signed, it took the Coalition’s armed intervention to save the Kurd and Shia minorities from slaughter by the Iraqi army. For 12 years, Saddam stubbornly defied UN demands and reneged on his own post-war commitments. Coalition aircraft continued to fly missions over Iraq, while UN inspectors came and went on a fruitless quest to ferret out Iraq’s chemical, biological, and nuclear programs. In retrospect, one might wonder why anyone should have been concerned about the “unfair overmatch.” Shouldn’t the purpose of war always be to win, to achieve a meaningful objective and decisive victory? How can one ask those “on the line” to fight – and sacrifice – otherwise? Gen. George S. Patton outlined it best, stressing in 1944 that wars were won not by dying for your country, but making the opponent die for his.

Ultimately, nagging misgivings over the political termination of the February 1991 Iraq war had to await March 2003 and another swift military victory, symbolized by the toppling of Saddam’s statue in Baghdad’s central square on April 9. This time, however, the asymmetric victory was followed by a costly, nine-year land occupation with still uncertain outcomes – despite the sacrifice of 4,422 American lives, with an additional 31,926 suffering grievous wounds. Beyond this are innumerable casualties suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). The overall war effort left behind a few successes and a number of failures. This saga highlights one of the most important aspects of waging war in an asymmetric environment: the need to devise strategies that translate battlefield successes into desired political outcomes and enduring strategic advantages.

The 2003 reengagement in Iraq was preceded and, in large measure, shaped by the most devastating asymmetric attack – perpetrated by anyone – since the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor. On the morning of September 11, 2001, four commercial jets were hijacked by 19 terrorists. The airplanes did not explode like bombs. The energy in the jet fuel of the two planes that hit the World Trade Center was equal to a quarter kiloton. The fireball from each impact expanded, consuming some of the jet fuel, while the rest of the burning fuel swept through the building at temperatures comparable to a large nuclear generating station, incinerating everything in its path. Officially, 3407 people (including 411 emergency workers) died at the WTC, in the Pentagon, and on a barren field in western Pennsylvania. Thousands more were wounded, traumatized, and dislocated. The pricetag was breath-taking, topping $100 billion in immediate outlays and $2 trillion of directly-attributable costs over a decade. The fall of global markets, lost wealth, and opportunity costs are incalculable.

That day, America entered the Third World War – popularly known as, until recently, the Global War on Terrorism. Since then, the United States has been engaged in a multi-front fight that includes operations in direct defense of the homeland and sustained military campaigns overseas. As both Presidents Bush and Obama stated, this is “a new kind of war” – a struggle that demands the concerted application of all instruments of national power – kinetic and non-kinetic – over an extended time frame.

The 9/11 attacks and the response that followed mark a new era of asymmetric, asynchronous wars. The al Qaeda Jihadists who masterminded the assaults did not engage the U.S. military in overseas battles. Instead, they sought to kill American civilians on American soil. In the face of this new danger, the historic distinction in American strategy between matters that are foreign and those that are domestic – as well as between the public and the private sector – has been blurred, perhaps forever. In this sense, 9/11 constitutes a strategic inflection point: a historic event that fundamentally transforms attitudes and approaches, and changes most of the answers and many of the questions.

Yet this first war of the 21st century is as deeply rooted in the ancient past as it is in the information age. With its focus on a global network of nation states, making it illegitimate for one country to make war on another to impose its belief system.

Religiously motivated violence is different from any other kind of asymmetric war for the simple reason that, for the true believer, there is no compromise about the sacred; there can be no bargaining, nor accommodation, nor truce. In this context, the laws of war don’t apply; killing becomes an end in itself; geographic boundaries are immaterial; and the temporal dimension is measured in generations. Strategic
Patience and crude innovations – like the suicide vest or an improvised explosive device (IED) – become as lethal as high-tech weaponry. **Protracted, asymmetric, asynchronous, geographically dispersed engagements, in which battles won don’t necessarily add up to victory, become the nature of this new struggle.**

The asymmetry is further compounded by new battle spaces and the increased number – and vulnerability – of targets, both physical and psychological. The addition of cyberspace to the traditional domains of air, sea, land, and space further alters the scope and intensity of the engagements. Tactics for economic/market manipulation and the potential threats to critical infrastructure become just as valuable as conventional military weaponry. Appropriate policies, authorities, and strategies must also be adapted to this new, diffuse, all-azimuth struggle.

While successes and failures are both relative, they are primarily in the eye of the beholder. **For a great power like the United States there is no such thing as a minor setback – symmetric or asymmetric.** Once we commit our military (and thus its prestige), anything less than a resounding success, seen as such by friend and foe alike, will feed the narrative of America as “the giant with feet of clay.” The damage to U.S. stature, credibility and influence – as well as its alliances’ cohesion and, ultimately, viability – will be immeasurable. Allies, in turn, will be pushed to fend for themselves, either entering coalitions of convenience or acquiring independent nuclear and cyber capabilities to defend their interests. The world remains a dangerous place. Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran haven’t taken a time-out to allow the United States to tend to its budget woes and draw down from distant engagements like Afghanistan, where another swift victory lapsed into a 12-year war, at the cost of 2,049 American lives and 18,311 wounded, many so grievously by an opponent deliberately intent on maiming as well as killing, that they will be in need of future care for 60-plus years.

It took the United States 25 years to start acting as if it had exorcised the ghosts of Vietnam. In truth, America remains haunted by these ghosts – well beyond the enduring clichés of “collateral damage,” “quagmire,” and “falling dominoes.” **Vietnam continues to impact both domestic politics and civil-military relations, with the ugly – false, yet always lurking just below the surface – stereotype of a war-mongering military-industrial complex pushing a reluctant President away from his Great Society agenda into protracted foreign commitments whose causes have long receded from the public’s memory. This – along with the horrendous cost in blood, treasure, and credibility resulting from failure to learn from past errors – makes the mastery of offense and defense in combating asymmetric threats a true national imperative.**