

# CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL IN MILITARY ACTIONS

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**Abstract:** The end of the Cold War, the accelerated globalization and the rapid development of means of warfare have brought about a new physiognomy of military actions, which in addition to conventional and unconventional warfare, now include military actions other than war. In this context, the present article seeks to answer the question "Is the conventional/unconventional dichotomy real in terms of contemporary military actions or the elements of each dimension overlap successfully in achieving the ultimate goal?"

**Keywords:** *military action, conventional warfare, unconventional warfare, irregular warfare, sub-conventional warfare, hybrid warfare*

## 1. Preliminary considerations

The Cold War triggered a paradigm shift on the world order, not only in terms of mutation from bipolarity to multipolarity, but also in terms of multiplication and new facets of war. They were and are present on almost all continents, benefiting from factors such as ethnic and religious intolerance, political instability and economic or ideological changes that have been brought in new democracies. Besides the mentioned paradigm shift, the globalization has deepened and its effects have positive and negative connotations: growth and cultural openness of corporations and destabilizing countries, their vulnerability to international economic developments and alienation of traditional cultures. Arguably, one of the results of globalization was dividing the world into stable and some unstable

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democratic parties characterized mainly by poverty, unemployment, imbalance of power and extremism. Major threats arose to international security, especially national and international terrorism, unstable states, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, ethnic tensions, the struggle for resources, drug trafficking and organized crime, etc.

Thus, the moments that marked NATO post-Cold War intervention in the Balkans were the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. While the first triggered the transformation of NATO, the second moment marked a strong change in the perception of security, introducing the first point on the agenda of the national and international security problem of transnational terrorism. The events that followed showed that military strategy is also influenced by globalization. The terrorist attacks in the U.S. have shown, on the one hand, that terrorists can develop a comprehensive strategy, exploiting communications technologies, financial networks and the free movement of people, and on the other hand, the military campaign in response to the terrorist threat was considered as “the first war of the twenty-first century”, as stated by the former U.S. President George W. Bush<sup>1</sup>. So, we can say that globalization has caused significant changes in the production of methods of warfare. Moreover, ever since the first half of the nineteenth century, Carl von Clausewitz stated that every age has its own kind of war, constraints and perceptions and, therefore, for each era a specific theory of war should be developed<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, the events of each era must be considered in light of its features.

In all these changes, Cicero's famous speech *Pro Milone* (*Milone Annio Pro Tito ad judicata oratio*, 52 BC) “*Inter arma enim silent leges*” (In times of war, the law falls silent), remained as a constant, valid both for conventional and unconventional military operations.

## 2. Some conceptual observations

The analysis of the conventional and unconventional military action requires, first, making several conceptual delimitations, as international literature shows a wide variety of theoretical formulations, especially in

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt M. CAMPBELL, “Globalization’s First War?”, in *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2002, pp. 7-14, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Carl von CLAUSEWITZ, *On War*, Princeton University Press, Reprint Edition, New Jersey, 1989, p. 593.

regard to new types of conflicts. Thus, we bring into focus the concepts of Romanian and American or Indian literature (India is one of the countries with a tradition of military strategy).

*Military action* is considered to be any action performed by military means decided by the government and the general conduct of which is ensured by the Chief of General Staff<sup>3</sup>. It is a coherent ensemble of activities organized and carried out by the military and/or different military structures in peacetime, crisis and conflict, in order to achieve strategic operational and tactical objectives. A military action is both an armed conflict and operations other than war and can be organized both at strategic level (the level sets similar goals) and at operational and tactical ones (the operational level objectives are, respectively, tactical)<sup>4</sup>.

In terms of *conventional, classic war*, definitions are almost identical around the world: type of war where weapons of mass destruction are not used, only classical combat means, the fight is fought only by regular armed forces, differing thus from the wars with irregular armed forces (militias, guerrillas, partisans and so on)<sup>5</sup>. Also, the fight goes on between two or more states in an open confrontation, each party's forces are clearly defined, and the overall aim is to weaken or destroy the enemy's military strength and the ability to engage in conventional war. American literature states that, in order to force surrender, either party may resort to specific unconventional warfare tactics<sup>6</sup>.

*Unconventional war*, also called special war in Romanian military literature is: the shape of waging political struggle with non-political and non-military means, putting into practice, in a planned and coordinated way, the political economic, psychological, propaganda, military measures against a state to destabilize its political power replacement and bringing it

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<sup>3</sup> *Glosar de termeni și expresii privind angajarea operațională a forțelor (Glossary of terms and expressions on the operational engagement of forces)*, AISM Publishinghouse, Bucharest, 2002, p. 4, apud Petre DUȚU; Gheorghe VĂDUVA, *Dinamica scopurilor în acțiunile militare*, Editura UNAp, 2004, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> "Război clasic (convențional)" (Classical/conventional warfare), in *Dicționar de termeni militari, (Dictionary of military terms)*, Ministry of National Defence of Romania, <http://www.mapn.ro/smg/cdiu/DICTIONAR%20DE%20TERMENI%20MILITARI.doc>

<sup>6</sup> "Conventional warfare", in *The Free Dictionary*, <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/conventional+warfare>.

into a state of dependency and subordination<sup>7</sup>. In American literature, the concept of unconventional warfare (unconventional warfare) includes activities taken to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, undermine or overthrow a government or occupying power by operations conducted through or with illegal auxiliary or guerrilla power, in a restricted area<sup>8</sup>. The “Dictionary of military and associated terms” of the U.S. Department of Defense includes the concept of irregular warfare as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over a relevant population<sup>9</sup>. The irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches in that it can engage the full spectrum of military and other capabilities, in order to erode the power, influence and will of the opponent. For these situations, India introduces the generic term of sub-conventional warfare<sup>10</sup> that includes all armed conflicts which are beyond the peaceful coexistence of states, but in the brink of war, including militancy insurgency, war proximity and terrorism employed as a means for insurrection movements or worn independently<sup>11</sup>.

This type of unconventional, particularly irregular or asymmetric sub-conventional war differs from the conventional one in that the distinctions between “in front of the front line” and “behind the front line”, between strategic and tactical actions and between combatants and non-combatants are ambiguous.

In the American literature, the conventional/unconventional dichotomy starts even from the level of war principles: from the nine principles of conventional war (objective, offensive, mass, manoeuvre, unity of command, economy of force, security, surprise, simplicity) to twenty

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<sup>7</sup> “Război special (neconvențional)” (“Special/unconventional warfare), in *Dicționar de termeni militari (Dictionary of military terms)*, Ministry of National Defence of Romania, <http://www.mapn.ro/smg/cdiu/Dictionary%20DE%20TERMENI%20MILITARI.doc>

<sup>8</sup> “Unconventional warfare”, in *Joint Publication 1-02. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 August 2012), p. 323.

<sup>9</sup> “Irregular warfare”, in *Joint Publication 1-02. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 August 2012), p. 161.

<sup>10</sup> The Indian Army is the first in the world to adopt in 2007 the sub-conventional warfare doctrine that establishes the main lines and strategies to conduct counter-insurgency operations in urban and rural areas., apud <http://www.india-defence.com/reports/2803>, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> K. C. DIXIT, “Sub-Conventional Warfare Requirements, Impact and Way Ahead, in *Journal of Defence Studies*” Vol. 4, No. 1, 2010, pp. 120-134, p. 121.

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political and strategic principles, on the one hand, and operational and tactical, on the other hand, the unconventional war<sup>12</sup>. The 20 proposed new principles overlap the four levels specified in Figure no. 1.

| Levels                  |                          | Principles of unconventional warfare |                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Political and strategic | Operational and tactical | Legitimacy                           | Observing the laws, avoiding organized violence; considering the will of the people                                                                                                                     |
|                         |                          | Knowledge                            | Knowing the nature of the conflict; knowing the enemy and its culture, beliefs and attitudes; knowing the terrain                                                                                       |
|                         |                          | Psychology                           | Using propaganda either to mobilize the enemy and win its support or to discourage it and destroy its will to fight.                                                                                    |
|                         |                          | Mobilization                         | Psychological operations aimed at winning the heart and mind of local population.                                                                                                                       |
|                         |                          | Objective                            | Focusing each military operation towards a clearly defined, decisive and tangible objective.                                                                                                            |
|                         |                          | Perseverance                         | Assessing risks and adopting a realistic attitude towards success; pursuing the goals patiently and diligently; avoiding excessive ambition at the expense of security.                                 |
|                         |                          | Unity of effort                      | Coordinating the civilian and military relations and integrating all the instruments of national power.                                                                                                 |
|                         |                          | Security and delusion                | We must never allow our enemy to gain an unexpected advantage.<br>Determining the enemy to allot its resources against false units and locations while the real intentions and locations remain secret. |
|                         |                          | Economy of forces                    | Allotting a minimum combat power essential to secondary efforts.                                                                                                                                        |
|                         |                          | Initiative                           | Exploiting the opportunities to gain an advantage.                                                                                                                                                      |
|                         |                          | Unpredictability                     | Avoiding the consistent activities which would allow the enemy to predict future actions.                                                                                                               |
|                         |                          | Offensive                            | Profit from, retain and exploit the initiative.                                                                                                                                                         |
|                         |                          | Flexibility                          | Refocusing the activities so that to meet the new situations and missions.                                                                                                                              |

<sup>12</sup> Deborah E. ELEK, "Unconventional Warfare and the Principles of War", in *Small Wars Journal*, Small Wars Foundation, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/elek.pdf>.

|                         |                          |                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Political and strategic | Operational and tactical | Adaptability                 | The ability to be effective in any environment and under any circumstances.                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                         |                          | Mobility                     | Small and lightly equipped units in order to be capable to respond quickly.                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                         |                          | Manoeuvre                    | Placing the enemy in a bad position by flexibly applying a manoeuvre.                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                         |                          | Concentration and dispersion | Concentrating the forces at a certain moment and place against the enemy's critical vulnerability in order to get the decisive results.<br>Placing the forces so that to avoid predictability but keeping the ability to react to the enemy attacks. |
|                         |                          | Surprise                     | Striking the enemy at an unexpected time and place.                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                         |                          | Simplicity                   | Preparing concise and clear plans and orders.                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                         |                          | Speed                        | Setting a highly operational tempo which should force the enemy in a proactive way.                                                                                                                                                                  |

**Figure no. 1: The 20 principles of unconventional warfare<sup>13</sup>**

It is noted that these principles derive from those of guerrilla war and try to capture the complexity of unconventional warfare, which do not have a clear definition that meets military strategy expert consensus, and are not subject to consistent policies and doctrines, except for some cases. The difficulty of formulating both the definition and the necessary policy elements derives from the fact that every conflict has its own unconventional peculiarities that can be identified in cases, actors, environment and purpose, which reduces the usefulness of lessons learned.

In fact, globalization, as a phenomenon outside which no scientific approach can be done, does not simplify the analysis of the unconventional dimension of military action, as its impact on military strategy is complex and unpredictable. Currently, military strategy is based on cutting-edge technologies and one of its basic principles is to minimize the number of victims and improve the efficiency of military action. Thus, concepts such as *smart defense*, *comprehensive approach*, *network warfare*, *effects-based approach*, *Fourth and Fifth generation warfare*, *long warfare*, *hybrid warfare*, *war among the population* etc. are brought into question.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, p. 73.

### 3. Conventional/unconventional in warfare and military operations other than war

The debate on conventional/unconventional dichotomy in military action must take into account the main categories of such actions: on one hand, the war in its various forms (conventional warfare, nuclear war, guerrilla warfare, civil war, network warfare, terrorist war, war against terrorism, information warfare, hybrid warfare, war among the population and so on), and on the other, military actions other than war (post-conflict military operations, military stabilization operations, peace enforcement, peace keeping and peace support operations, psychological operations, humanitarian operations/actions, etc). Even if the phrase “military actions other than war” is becoming less used in recent years, being replaced by peace operations and other related concepts, we call it into question in order to highlight the aspects of conventional and unconventional military action.

Next, we will focus on these main two categories of military action and attempt to identify the elements of the above-mentioned dichotomy compared to the conventional definition of war and the principles of international humanitarian law.

The international humanitarian law is conventionally divided into three fundamental principles on the means and methods of warfare:

1. The parties in an armed conflict do not have unlimited rights in the choice of means and methods of warfare.

2. In using these tools and methods, there should always be a clear distinction between military objectives, on the one hand, and civilians and civilian objects, on the other hand, so that the attacks are not directed only against the first.

3. To limit as much as possible, the suffering of the combatants and the destructions<sup>14</sup>.

Applying these principles requires prohibition means and methods of warfare which: cause superfluous damage (effects unnecessarily aggravating suffering of persons hors de combat such as the wounded, sick,

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<sup>14</sup> Ion DRAGOMAN, *Regimul juridic al mijloacelor și metodelor război interzise*, Documentare/studii Centrul de Drept Internațional Umanitar, <http://www.mapn.ro/smg/cdiu/prof.%20dragoman.doc>.

shipwrecked); they have effects that do not distinguish between military objectives, on one hand, and civilian population and civilian objects, on the other hand (blank weapons, chemical, bacteriological and nuclear weapons and thermonuclear), and large effects, serious and sustainable natural environment (bacteriological weapons, chemical weapons, nuclear weapons modification techniques environment)<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, conventional war should follow these principles and rules, but the reality is more complex, the boundary between conventional and unconventional is very thin.

The physiognomy of military actions is constantly changing due to the coexistence of conventional and the unconventional size correlated with the evolution of humanity in all its aspects. If, until recently (the twentieth century), there have been many debates about conventional and nuclear war, recent decades have brought to the forefront many concepts such as the ones above.

*Nuclear war* is considered to be illustrating “classical” unconventional military actions. It involves the use of nuclear weapons, which compared to the conventional is destructive both in scale and breadth of destruction. Such a war is considered to have existential risk for civilization, especially large scale use of nuclear weapons against a country (in addition to military targets are concerned and the economic and civil). Limited nuclear war is also mentioned, which refers to the use of nuclear weapons scale between two or more belligerents aimed mainly at military targets, as a prelude to an invasion of conventional forces or as a preventive measure against a potential attack.

*Guerrilla warfare* is a form of irregular warfare that seeks to impose will on the opponent, causing him to drop his plans through wear forces, extremely violent military asymmetric and irregular actions. It involves small groups of combatants, including armed civilians using military tactics such as ambushes, sabotage and raids, and having great mobility to harass a more numerous and less traditional and mobile or strike a vulnerable target, having the ability to withdraw immediately. So, guerrilla warfare and tactics combine conventional weapons with unconventional ones.

*Civil war* aims to impose the will of a party to another party, in terms of taking control of a country or region, a region's independence, changing

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem.*



government policy and even the conquest of political power using military force. Civil war is a high intensity conflict because it often involves numerous regular armed forces, organized and supported, the number of victims is higher and resource consumption as well. Regarding the conventional / unconventional dichotomy, the civil war prevails in one way or another depending on the size of waging the fight: conventional front lines when there is a clear and regular army; unconventional when either one party or both have irregular characteristics and the front lines are not clear.

*Network warfare* (NW), a specific concept of the information age, is rooted in fundamental changes in contemporary Western society, especially in the economic and technological information such as: changes in center-based platform network (core network) type C4, the difference between independent vision (action) and specific complex dynamic system that adapts continuously and, not the least, the increased importance of strategic options for adaptation and survival even in these changing systems<sup>16</sup>. NW is a modern war, it uses C4I2SR systems organized in a core network, a network of sensors and network warfare platforms that use information technology weapons systems performance and outstanding technical capabilities. Much has been written about this type of war, the expectations are that NW changes the character and nature of war, causing conventional war to become obsolete<sup>17</sup>.

The *terrorist war* aims, through extreme and surprising violence, at creating a tense international and regional situation, characterized by terror, fear and confusion<sup>18</sup>. Last years' events showed that the main political goal of such a war is striking the civilized world in order to erode or destroy it in the name of extremist ideals and the military actions cause losses among the civilian population and political, social and cultural institutions. The terrorist war, obviously, does not comply with the rules of international humanitarian law, mainly the strategies, techniques and unconventional means.

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<sup>16</sup> Mihail POPESCU, Valentin ARSENIU, Gheorghe VĂDUVA, *Military art over millennia. Volume 2, Army Technical Publishing Center*, Bucharest, 2004, pp. 301-302.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher M. SENENKO, *Network Centric Warfare and the Principles of War*, Joint Forces Staff College, Joint Advanced Warfighting School, Norfolk, 2007, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a468857.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Petre DUȚU, Gheorghe VĂDUVA, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 15.

The war against terrorism is born out of a desire to eradicate the terrorist phenomenon as a result of terrorist attacks against the U.S. on 11 September 2001 and does not cover terrorist operations and campaigns waged by Russia and India. This war was called World War III, World War IV (assuming the Cold War was the third), long war, global war on terrorism, the war against al-Qaeda etc. The American response to the September 11 attacks was multidimensional and included both the conventional dimension of the war, as well as the unconventional: defense institutions and strategic objectives by military means, destroying networks and database infrastructure of terrorist organizations.

*Informational warfare* refers to the imposition of political will by creating an impenetrable active, offensive information system, able to ensure an ongoing information dominance<sup>19</sup> and involves gathering tactical information, ensuring the validity of the information, use propaganda and disinformation to demoralize or manipulate the enemy and the public undermining the quality of information and preventing the adverse party from collecting this information. It seems that information warfare goes beyond the conventional and unconventional in that the troops, tanks, airplanes, submarines, missiles and other conventional weapons are replaced with binary digital code and go to battlefield digitization. The American literature also speaks of electronic warfare and cyber warfare.

*Hybrid warfare* is the most striking example for the impossibility of clearly separating the conventional size of the unconventional military action: combining conventional war with irregular and cyber warfare. Moreover, hybrid warfare is a combination of symmetric and asymmetric war, the forces leading conventional military operations against enemy forces and targets at the same time, trying to gain control of the indigenous population in the conflict zone by securing and stabilizing it (stabilization operations)<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, this type of war makes a connection with the military actions other than war, those peace operations above.

*Peace operations or military actions other than war* is the crisis response of agencies and nations with limited contingency operations,

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>20</sup> John J. McCUEN, "Hybrid Wars", in *Military Review*, March-April 2008, Pittsburgh, p. 108.

involving all instruments of national power to reduce conflict missions, appeal for peace and environmental modeling so as to make possible reconciliation and rebuilding and facilitate the transition to a legitimate government<sup>21</sup>. It is obvious that the challenges faced by military units in peace operations are different from conventional military operations.

The factors that differentiate conventional war military actions other than war include operational principles, lack of strategic direction, expanding the scope, limited intelligence, cultural and political diversity, multiple actors, media exposure, the lack or limited rule of law, constrictive rules of engagement, possibility of manifestation in austere environments, domination by small independent operations, the need for visible presence, progress in urban areas, the need to integrate psychological operations units and civilian business, the need for extended negotiations<sup>22</sup>. The interventions in recent years have highlighted inefficiencies in certain aspects of these operations resulting from misapplication of operational principles or inadequate understanding of the characteristics of the environments in which past operations were performed and also of the reasons of the success of the innovative tactics used.

The most significant differences between conventional military action and peace operations occur in the principles that govern them. Unlike the first, where the strategic goal is to defeat your opponent and achieve the national and alliance strategic objectives, peace operations aim either to solve the crisis situations without taking to war or to restore peace or impose terms defined by mandate with preservation of impartial operation or support the people in need as a result of wars, conflicts, crises and disasters. Objective, offensive, mass, manoeuvre, unity of command, economy of force, security, surprise and simplicity principles remain dominant conventional military actions, but, according to some specialists, as the characteristics of the international security environment has changed, some of these principles became prevalent in new types of military operations

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<sup>21</sup> "Peace operations", in *Joint Publication 1-02. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 August 2012), p. 239.

<sup>22</sup> Michael J. HARDESTY; Jason D. ELLIS, *Training for Peace Operations. The U.S. Army Adapts to the Post-Cold War World*, United States Institute for Peace, Washington, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/pwks12.pdf>, p. 5.

other than war: unity of effort, restriction, perseverance and legitimacy<sup>23</sup>. The unity of effort refers to the need for coordination at both multinational forces and the cooperation with various governmental structures. The restriction principle is also very important for peace operations because, unlike conventional military actions, whose success is favored by the use of overwhelming force, in this case no restriction regarding the use of force may have adverse effects. Perseverance is a key principle in military actions other than war because of their long-term conduct, some analysts even considering that it takes twenty years to deliver social changes necessary to avoid conflict<sup>24</sup>. Finally, legitimacy is understood as a necessary condition for the force presence and operations performed by it to be perceived as legitimate, with the authority to use appropriate means to achieve the goals set by the conventions recognized by the parties.

From the above, we can notice that the dichotomy between conventional and unconventional military actions is forced, at least in absolute theoretical terms, as now these two dimensions are coexisting in the same action, and their combination can ensure success. It is also obvious that when we refer to unconventional military actions, the meaning assigned to them is much broader than simply placing the antithesis of conventional warfare characteristics, the necessary and detailed appeal to the principles of international humanitarian law as a basic framework debate on military action. So, we can say that, except conventional war, none of the types of military action above is only conventional or unconventional exclusively, but all include features of both dimensions.

In conclusion, while many countries have invested heavily in recent years to modernize conventional forces, the possibility of starting a conventional war type conflict decreased significantly. However, these investments are used to support a growing number of large scale military actions, predominantly unconventional because, as we said earlier, contemporary conflicts can not be assigned exclusively to one or the other of the dimensions analyzed.

The nature of war has been gradually modified by factors that can be ascribed to globalization and, although the armed struggle remained the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

main form of practicing organized violence now, at least for national and international coalition forces, are designed to prevent unnecessary victims and destruction. The traditional principles of war have not changed but have acquired new meanings, new additions illustrating the physiognomy and the nature of contemporary conflicts: legitimacy, knowledge, psychology, mobilization, objective, perseverance, unity of effort, security and deception, economy forces, motion, unpredictability, offensive, flexibility, adaptability, mobility, manoeuvre, concentration and dispersion, surprise, simplicity and speed. In addition to these substantive changes, there were changes especially in the sphere of military technologies, no armed force being allowed to be static in terms of its nature and capabilities. All such modifications and changes are aimed at military actions conducted in a multidimensional fluid battle space, encompassing both conventional and unconventional elements.



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<sup>1</sup> *Război clasic (convențional)*, în „Dicționar de termeni militari”, Ministerul Apărării Naționale, f.a., <http://www.mapn.ro/smg/cdiu/Dictionary%20DE%20TERMENI%20MILITARI.doc>

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