

# **Manoeuvre, overmatch and asymmetry: Lessons on firepower's course through the Great War**

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## **An early manoeuvrist approach**

Contrary to widely-held perceptions, the first year of the Great War saw significant examples of what would now be termed a *manoeuvrist approach* in war. Schlieffen's oft-maligned plan to outflank the formidable but static French Army positions, and punch through a not-yet fully-fielded British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the small, fragmented lowland countries' armies, was decidedly manoeuvrist as an operational stroke.

Similarly, the style of mobile defensive withdrawal of the BEF epitomised at Mons, and the tempo attained by advancing German troops during the Retreat to the Marne over a series of tactical actions including Le Cateau and N ry were similarly manoeuvrist in their inspiration. Moreover, as the 'Race to the Coast' closed off the Western Front's terrain for freedom of manoeuvre, the Allies' intent to open up the 'soft underbelly of Europe' at Gallipoli was equally manoeuvrist, albeit at the strategic level.

## **Asymmetry in an industrial war**

Notably, these examples of a manoeuvrist approach did not lead to overall success, due primarily to shortfalls in either technology or application, or both. In all of these examples, while embodying a concept of avoiding an enemy's strengths and exploiting their weaknesses, they were not pursued in a fashion of complete *asymmetry*, wherein success might be attained through the exploitation of a second warfighting domain, or a technological advantage that had simply no contemporary counter.

Meanwhile, the inklings of such asymmetry in application were appearing, even as the Western and Eastern fronts deepened and consolidated into what were overwhelmingly contests of *overmatch*; where superiority in numbers or firepower was attained wholly, or through concentration of force.

Asymmetry in Great War firepower appeared firstly in the mastery of indirect artillery fire; using technology that could allow one side to find, fix and engage an enemy with firepower from an origin that itself was unseen, and therefore unable to be countered. As firepower took to the air in the form of aircraft that could not only strafe ground targets but could carry increasingly heavy bomb loads, this too was exemplary of cross-domain asymmetry. A third example embodying both technology and cross-domain advantage was the German U-boat's realisation as a truly effective sub-sea attack on surface combatants and shipping.

These early examples of actual asymmetry are instructive on several levels: firstly, they embody an innovative combination of technology and cross-domain impunity; secondly, while often initially highly successful, each was subsequently able to be countered through development of technology and techniques that limited, matched or invalidated their use: counter-battery fires; anti-aircraft artillery and defensive counter-air; and depth charges and aerial observation. Thirdly, all were hampered by either inadequate technology or application in unleashing the idea's full potential.

## Frustration and innovation

As both asymmetry and manoeuvre faltered as sources of tactical and operational success on the Western and Eastern Fronts at least, both Allied and Central High Commands resorted increasingly to success through overmatch. The Somme offensives of 1916 characterised this change in emphasis, and the cataclysm at Verdun described what perhaps was its most awful culmination.

Nevertheless, technological advances in elements of firepower such as destructive effect, accuracy, and prediction were pursued relentlessly through this period. Yet, used in isolation and in incomplete fashions, these innovations merely added to overall lethality, without leading to a consummately successful *offset*.

The contests of attrition of 1916 and 1917 were universally repugnant, yet undertaken largely in desperation as a sole resort, until a true breakthrough in mindset, technology and technique could be devised. Solution came – at least on the Western Front – not in a single innovation, but through the simultaneous honing of competitive advantages from multiple innovations, and the fusion of each into the combined arms approach. Together, they provided a potent combination of concentration of force, offensive action, security and surprise. The short-lived successes of the German Spring Offensive in March 1918 provided a precursory example and inspiration for the Allies – who first unleashed a concept demonstrator at Hamel, and then in full at Soissons in July, and at Amiens in August 1918 respectively.

Importantly, the perfection of the overmatch was not the ultimate stroke; rather, it set the conditions to allow a final return to manoeuvre and an offensive tempo that a shattered and exhausted Germany was unable to match.

## Lessons

The progress of firepower through the Great War tells an instructive narrative of the pursuit of manoeuvre, asymmetry and overmatch in warfare. Multi-domain asymmetry may be an ideal aspiration, but its advantage is frequently limited in time, and curtailed by technological or application shortfall.

A manoeuvrist approach is invariably preferable to attrition for a numerically weaker force, but resort to overmatch may be unavoidable. A force must be capable of both resilience and adaptation to pursue, develop and field another means of offset to regain the initiative, effect a breakthrough, and resume a manoeuvrist approach that exploits inherent advantage.

