

## International Legal Challenges in Regulating Asymmetric Armed Conflicts\*

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[10.15408/jch.v13i3.49202](https://doi.org/10.15408/jch.v13i3.49202)

### Abstract

The purpose of the article was to analyze the international legal aspects of asymmetric armed conflicts, including the right to self-defense and the legal status of civilians. The methodological basis of the study consists of an examination of international legal instruments, such as the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions, and their Additional Protocols. The additional literature review included contemporary conflict studies and international humanitarian law. Results showed that asymmetric conflicts blur the line between combatants and civilians, complicate the application of proportionality, and diminish the effectiveness of classical *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* norms. The conclusion highlights the need to apply international law to the involvement of non-state actors and to the growing number of cases in which states invoke preventive self-defense, while ensuring strict compliance with its legal criteria.

**Keywords:** Asymmetric Conflict; Armed Conflict; Right to Self-Defense; Combatant; Civilians.

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\* Received: June 19, 2025, revised: July 21, 2025, accepted: July 24, 2025, published: December 30, 2025.

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## A. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international environment is marked by a significant increase in the complexity of threats to global and national security (Grigoryan, 2024). One of the key factors of instability is the emergence of new forms of political and religious extremism, as well as the strengthening of local nationalisms (Sergeeva & Pitul'ko, 2023), which contributes to growing tensions both within states and in their external relations (Bashlueva & Kartashov, 2024). Unresolved political, economic, and social contradictions often evolve into disputes and subsequently into armed conflicts of varying intensity (Khudoikina et al., 2024; Krainova et al., 2024b; Pshenichnov, 2023). Contemporary conflicts are further complicated by their initiation by external political or religious actors, combined with the influence of ethnocultural factors (Duissenbayeva et al., 2024). The protracted nature of such conflicts can lead to the erosion of state institutions and the emergence of “failed states” (Wallenstein et al., 2018), including structures such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and other non-state entities with their own capacity for violence.

In turn, the military capabilities of a state are contrasted with the disproportionately smaller capabilities of these actors (Krainova et al., 2024a; Stepanova, 2020). Almost all elements of the international order are subject to pressure from new phenomena and processes of transformation. The participants in international relations are changing. The state itself is also undergoing significant transformation as one of the main actors on the international stage. The importance and diversity of non-state participants in international relations continue to grow (Vaslavskiy, 2022).

During any armed conflict, the parties to the hostilities are required to observe the norms and principles of international humanitarian law applicable to armed conflict (*jus in bello*, the law governing conduct in war), regardless of the legality of the conflict under the law governing recourse to war (*jus ad bellum*) or whether the hostilities are carried out in the name of lawful self-defense or constitute a prohibited act of aggression (Ilovaisky & Turov, 2022; Malyshev et al., 2022).

In examining contemporary armed conflicts, the decisive factor is not so much the motives behind their emergence as the legal and factual methods by which they are conducted. Two international legal aspects are particularly significant for asymmetric armed conflicts: the manner in which states exercise the right of self-defense and the conditions under which civilians lose protection when they take direct part in hostilities (Nurmaganbet et al., 2025). These elements form the basis of the legal framework that regulates the conduct of the

parties in situations characterized by asymmetry of power and status (Belikova, 2024).

Given the above, the purpose of the article was to analyze the legal aspects of an asymmetric armed conflict. To clarify the subject of the study, we examine the legal concept of an asymmetric armed conflict and analyze its core legal dimensions, specifically the right of self-defense and the direct participation of civilians in hostilities.

## **B. METHODS**

To achieve the purpose of the study document analysis was chosen as a primary method. It relied on different types of materials depending on the focus of the research. The first group consisted of scholarly materials (journal articles, monographs, conference proceedings) that explain concepts and models of radicalization and examine extremism and terrorism as outcomes of the radicalization process.

The second group was based on an examination of official international documents, legislative acts, and protocols, including the following: Charter of the United Nations (United Nations, 1945); Geneva Conventions of 1949 (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 1949). Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts (Protocol I) (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 1977a) and relating to the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts (Protocol II) (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 1977b).

## **C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Legal Concept of Asymmetric Armed Conflict**

The concept of an armed conflict in its traditional understanding is broader than the concept of war, since it encompasses all forms of armed struggle, whereas war refers to a state of armed struggle between states and is contrasted with a state of peace.

According to Malyshev et al. (2022), an armed conflict is “a type of armed violence consisting in achieving the objectives of a state, a coalition, or a social group through coordinated actions involving the use of armed forces or organized armed groups” (p. 22), while war is defined as “a state of functioning of a state characterized by the presence of an acute external or internal conflict

resolved through violence, in which a significant part of the state's potential is engaged" (p. 24).

As practice has shown, despite the creation of prohibitions after the end of the Second World War, the international community has not been able to eliminate war from relations between peoples. Acknowledging this, primary attention was given to strengthening the protection of civilians during military operations in conflicts of both international and non-international character, as codified in the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention) (1949), the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts (Protocol I) (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 1977a), and the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 relating to the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts (Protocol II) (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 1977b). As can be seen, in international legal documents adopted after 1949, the term "war" was replaced by the term "armed conflict."

Modern armed conflicts are far broader and more multifaceted than those of the past (Pitelinsky & Makovey, 2025). They differ in their complexity, scale, and nature, and involve the extensive use of contemporary military and information technologies (Grudtsina et al., 2025; Vaslavskiy & Gabuev, 2017). Many of today's threats are of a non-state nature (Sapaev et al., 2024). This also applies to the potential targets of attacks, which are not necessarily states or the soldiers of an opposing army (Caforio, 2012).

The asymmetric conflict is not a new concept, particularly in the military sphere, since every conflict to date has contained certain asymmetric features (Paulus & Vashakmadze, 2009). Previously, however, attention was focused primarily on its quantitative and qualitative aspects. The situation changed as a result of the events of 11 September 2001. Since then, the asymmetric conflict has been discussed as a new phenomenon in the field of international security, both in terms of the actors involved and the methods and means employed by them (Podberezkin & Kharkevich, 2015).

The term "asymmetric conflict" is used to describe an armed conflict "in which a state and its armed forces confront an opponent whose objectives, organization, means of warfare, and methods of conducting hostilities do not fit within the established concept of war" (Deriglazova, 2010, p. 55). Asymmetric warfare doesn't operate within the notion of a battlefield. "Combat operations and the front take place in a dispersed manner without maintaining geographic or chronological continuity" (Sudhir, 2008, p. 60). Moreover, as Edwards (2011)

notes, “the essence of an asymmetric conflict lies in indirect action, which involves bypassing the opponent’s strengths and striking at his weak, most vulnerable points, as well as employing unconventional means and methods” (p. 231). The only rule in an asymmetric conflict is to avoid rules. “Asymmetric operations consist in drawing the adversary into unknown areas, using his strength against him, and turning his weakness into one’s own strength” (Stepanova, 2010, p. 52).

The concept of asymmetry in military operations is understood differently depending on the context and level of classification (Volkova et al., 2024). In the broadest sense, asymmetry in the military context refers to a situation characterized by incompatibility, incommensurability, dissimilarity, or disproportionality between the objects compared (Weiner, 2017). The term “asymmetry” is often misused to describe so-called disproportionate conflicts, where only the economic or military capabilities of the opponents are compared without considering differences in the formal and legal status of the parties to the conflict. When pointing to the unequal standing of adversaries, it is also necessary to refer to the phenomenon of the asymmetrization of military violence, which describes a situation in which the parties engaged in hostilities are usually unequal opponents (Lele, 2014). A characteristic feature of asymmetry is the elevation of previously subordinate forms of violence, such as guerrilla warfare or terrorism, to a position of superiority (Kutsev, 2024; Merom, 2012; Shkhagapsoev, 2024).

When a conflict is viewed from the perspective of international law, it must be acknowledged that a conflict is asymmetric only when the parties have different international legal status. This means that, in light of existing formal and customary norms and principles, one of the parties is not a subject of international law (Geiß, 2006).

One of the most important features of asymmetric threats, which largely derives from the non-state nature of the actors generating such threats, is their quasi-military character. A threat posed by non-state actors that is classified as asymmetric does not include the threat of an attack by regular armed forces, which prevents it from being considered a military threat in the traditional sense of the term. The nature of these dangers stems to a great extent from the specific methods and means employed by non-state actors. Their unconventional nature, which defines the very essence of asymmetry, is not confined to the military domain. It concerns not only differences in methods of conducting hostilities, the ways in which lethal means are used by actors posing an asymmetric threat, and the military capabilities they possess. It is also determined by the fact that the

activities of these actors extend to non-military spheres, such as economic relations (Sergeeva et al., 2023) or psychological relations (Zhukova et al., 2025). Often, it is precisely this part of their activity that determines the actual scale and level of the threat. This means that their actions are directed not so much toward achieving military successes in the traditional sense, that is, toward destroying as much of the opponent's military potential as possible, but toward extending the conflict into the civilian sphere and reducing the will to resist within society and among the authorities of the attacked state (Maksimenkov & Bogdanov, 2021).

In a conflict between an actor posing an asymmetric threat and the state it targets, there is no clearly defined zone of responsibility. A non-state actor may initiate hostile actions against a state at any time and in any place, suspend them for a certain period, and resume them whenever it finds convenient. This form of confrontation is total in the sense that it may, in principle, occur across the entire territory of the attacked state as well as beyond its borders. In its activities, the non-state actor deliberately erases distinctions between military and civilian targets, focusing primarily on the latter (Sinai, 2017).

The activities of non-state actors are directed primarily at civilians and civilian institutions, which constitute far easier targets for attack. Their actions are guided by non-military considerations, including the psychological consequences such attacks may have for the civilian population (Kunstler, 2011). This is why it is crucial to apply the principle of proportionality between the means and methods used and the military advantage sought, as well as the harm inflicted on civilians, regardless of the legal status of the actors conducting hostilities (Klyachin, 2024).

An important element of asymmetric activity is the factor of time. In an asymmetric conflict, a state, alliance, or coalition must achieve a rapid victory if it seeks to avoid constant exposure to further attacks. In such circumstances, the state (or states, alliances, and coalitions) is placed in a defensive position. The lack of clarity, including the blurred boundary between war and peace, the ambiguous identification of the opponent, the opponent's freedom to choose the time and place of attack, and the disregard for existing norms of international law, decisively affects the effectiveness of countering such actors or mitigating the negative consequences of their actions.

If, in the course of an asymmetric war, a state actor violates applicable and widely recognized rules, this fact is effectively used by the opposing side. The limited participation of state actors is usually the result of insufficient resolve and the need to comply with norms of international law. At the same time, an

asymmetric opponent, not being a subject of international law, does not consider itself bound by such constraints.

It should be noted that states, as subjects of international law, may use force only for the purpose of self-defense, relying primarily on Article 51 of the UN Charter. The higher the legal status of one of the parties, the greater its ability to invoke legal grounds to justify the use of force. A permanent member of the UN Security Council possesses significantly broader powers than ordinary states in determining the legality of any resort to force. In internal armed conflicts, the state will deny the right of internal groups to engage in armed struggle and will claim that, as a state structure, it holds the monopoly on the use of force against individuals. Therefore, the right to use force is usually recognized as belonging to the side that possesses superior military capabilities.

## **2. The Right to Individual or Collective Self-Defense in an Asymmetric Conflict**

Article 2(4) of the UN Charter states that “all Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.” However, the provisions of the UN Charter establish two exceptions to this prohibition: the right of self-defense (Article 51) and enforcement measures undertaken by the Security Council (Articles 39–50). According to Article 51, the condition for invoking the right of self-defense is the need to respond to an armed attack carried out by one state against the territory of another.

By granting states the right to individual self-defense (where the state subjected to an armed attack repels it independently) or collective self-defense (where the state that has been attacked requests military assistance from another state, which then provides it), the UN Charter introduces several rules applicable to the exercise of this right.

The lawful exercise of this right arises only in the event of an armed attack against a state. A state that has been attacked is required to notify the UN Security Council immediately of this fact. The right of self-defense exists only until the Security Council takes appropriate measures, and the assessment of the exercise of this right must take into account the factors of necessity and proportionality.

Measures of self-defense must be undertaken immediately after an armed attack, and the right may be invoked only for the purpose of repelling the attack. However, in some cases, states that have suffered an armed attack undertake

retaliatory actions long after the attack, while still referring to self-defense. If the armed attack has ceased and there is no longer a threat of further attacks, the right of self-defense terminates. Otherwise, further actions would be inconsistent with international law (Sandor, 2018).

The right of self-defense regulated by the UN Charter is subsidiary and temporary, and its lawfulness is subject to review by the UN Security Council. Article 51 highlights the important role of the Security Council as the principal body responsible for maintaining international peace and security. It is intended to serve as a mechanism for verifying the legality of the exercise of the right of self-defense. In each case of the use of force, the criteria of legality and legitimacy developed in Security Council practice must be considered. Factors to be taken into account include the seriousness of the threat, the actual purpose of the action, the ultimate goal of the military measures, the proportionality of the means employed, and the assessment of the consequences. The seriousness of the threat should be understood as an actual or imminent armed attack against a state. A proper purpose means that the use of force cannot be regarded as a pre-planned war undertaken under the pretext of self-defense (Thiessen & Darweish, 2018).

Doctrine also draws attention to two additional aspects of the right of self-defense. First, this right must be territorially limited to the region in which the aggression took place. Second, in assessing the exercise of self-defense, the Security Council must consider the prohibition of attacks on civilians and the prohibition of using certain types of weapons. Another requirement is that the response must be proportionate to the means employed by the aggressor. A violation of this principle results in the international responsibility of the state and, in extreme cases, may lead to the designation of the state that exceeded the limits of self-defense as the aggressor (Levy, 2008). When exercising the right of self-defense, a state may use any means, provided they are consistent with international law.

Changes in international reality have made the concept of preventive armed operations increasingly relevant. A preventive operation is aimed not at stopping an attack but at preventing it over the long term. Its purpose is to deprive the adversary of the ability to carry out an attack by eliminating its military potential. A preventive operation responds to a serious threat that is not, however, imminent or unavoidable. This differs from preemptive self-defense, which involves an armed response to an imminent attack, meaning a situation in which the likelihood of attack is high and real. A state may undertake military action if there is a high probability of an imminent attack, and passive waiting

would be unreasonable for the security of the state and its population (Johnson, 2015).

Such an operation must, however, be preceded by the exhaustion of all peaceful means. In the context of a preventive operation, invoking self-defense blurs the essence of the action. This requires a very broad interpretation of the concepts of proximity and inevitability, which may lead to numerous errors and abuses. In both preemptive and preventive operations, the decisive factor is the assessment of the adversary's intentions and the impending threat, as well as the likelihood of its occurrence. Any use of armed force other than in self-defense or pursuant to a Security Council resolution is incompatible with the UN Charter. Preventive or preemptive use of armed force creates a risk of arbitrary interpretation of the law and subjective assessment of threats. Attempts to justify preventive armed force without a Security Council decision may lead to anarchy.

### **3. Direct Participation of Civilians in Military Operations**

In accordance with the principles of international humanitarian law of armed conflicts (hereinafter IHL), the protection of the civilian population is based on one of its fundamental principles, the principle of distinction between combatants, who have the right to take part in hostilities, and civilians, who do not take part in hostilities and are protected by law. Belonging to one of these groups affects the legal position of the individual and entails the application of different legal provisions in accordance with the rules governing their status.

The principle of distinction is set out in both Additional Protocols of 1977, which state: "In order to ensure respect for and protection of the civilian population and civilian objects, the Parties to the conflict shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives, and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives."

Combatants are all members of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, with the exception of medical and religious personnel. The concept of a "combatant" has no legal definition in IHL. Moreover, IHL contains no single list of persons who have combatant status. Such a list is inferred from the rules that determine who is entitled to prisoner-of-war status. Medical and religious personnel are designated as non-combatants under IHL and, unlike combatants, do not have the right to prisoner-of-war status.

Civilians, on the other hand, are all persons who are not members of the armed forces. The notion of the civilian population includes all civilians.

Combatants have the right to undertake military actions, including the use of lethal force, which may be directed against them as long as the armed conflict continues. They must ensure the protection of the civilian population, comply with IHL, and distinguish themselves from civilians when taking part in an attack or in a military operation preparatory to an attack. The implementation of this obligation may be particularly difficult for irregular armed groups. Failure to comply may deprive a combatant of protection and therefore of the right to prisoner-of-war status. Furthermore, individuals not belonging to regular armed forces must distinguish themselves by wearing a fixed distinctive sign visible at a distance and by carrying arms openly.

To ensure protection for those entitled to it, it is necessary to distinguish not only between civilians and military personnel, but also between civilians who do not take a direct part in hostilities and civilians who actively engage in such activities. Under IHL, the notion of “direct participation in hostilities” refers to acts which, when carried out by civilians, deprive them of protection from the dangers arising from military operations (Ibrayeva et al., 2025).

During the period of their direct participation in hostilities, civilians become lawful targets for attack, but only for the duration of such participation. This means that once “direct participation in hostilities” ends, the civilian is again protected and may no longer be targeted. The restoration of legal protection against being targeted does not preclude criminal liability for acts committed during the period of participation, including active involvement in hostilities (Ivanov, 2024). The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their 1977 Additional Protocols do not contain a definition of “direct” or “active” participation in hostilities.

In asymmetric conflicts, ensuring the protection of the civilian population is particularly challenging. This is because military operations involve unauthorized individuals who intentionally do not distinguish themselves from the civilian population (Maksimov et al., 2024). It is characteristic that hostilities are carried out by civilians who do not have combatant status but who continuously perform military functions in the context of an ongoing conflict. It is especially important to identify such individuals and determine at what point they lose legal protection.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (hereinafter ICRC) has undertaken to interpret “direct participation in hostilities” also in the context of

the conduct of individuals who perform “continuous combat functions” in organized armed groups (Sinai, 2017). In 2009, under the auspices of the ICRC, several guiding principles concerning the acquisition of “direct participation in hostilities” were developed. Their necessary condition is the assignment of responsibility for preparing, carrying out, and directing activities that meet all of the following criteria:

- acts that cause military harm or damage to protected objects, including sabotage, destruction of property, armed attacks, and the killing of civilians (Grinenko et al., 2025);
- acts must have a direct causal link to military harm or damage to protected objects;
- acts must be carried out with the intent to participate in an armed conflict (Sandor, 2018).

The performance of a continuous combat function within an organized armed group allows any actions of such a civilian to be qualified as “direct participation in hostilities.” This leads to the loss of legal protection even if the civilian is not carrying out activities related to the conflict at a given moment. Moreover, as in the case of combatants, such individuals become lawful targets.

Civilians who unlawfully take a direct part in hostilities lose protection from attack for as long as they continue to participate. The categories of civilians and combatants are mutually exclusive and complementary, which is essential for the effective functioning of IHL (Bethlehem, 2025). In cases of doubt regarding legal status, each person is presumed to be a civilian until their actual status is verified (the so-called presumption of civilian status).

## D. CONCLUSIONS

Asymmetric conflicts, in the strictly military sense, are not a new threat in the modern world. The new approach to the issue of asymmetric conflicts reflects international law, specifically the status of the parties involved in the conflict. Non-state actors, particularly terrorist organizations, frequently and deliberately use civilians as human shields in their operations not only to protect their fighters but also to increase the effectiveness and impact of their actions, as well as to exert pressure on international public opinion to achieve their strategic objectives. The conduct of non-state actors requires states, as entities bound by international legal norms, to exercise far greater caution and to assess whether

the military advantage gained from an attack outweighs the collateral harm to civilians.

Asymmetric armed conflicts are wars that are extremely difficult to control and resolve through classical methods. They challenge the existing norms of international law governing armed conflicts. The methods and means of warfare used in modern armed conflicts imply that applicable legal norms may function as a constraint on the party that is a subject of international law. Conversely, the law becomes an instrument of warfare, skillfully used by non-state actors. This is because such actors do not comply with legal norms and principles; instead, they skillfully manipulate them to achieve their objectives.

International law regulating war and peace was created with inter-state relations in mind; the concept of non-state entities was not considered in the drafting of subsequent legal instruments. This raises the question of whether the right of self-defense under existing rules of international law enables a state to act effectively against actors that are not subjects of international law, as well as against those who support such actors, even financially.

We believe that a state must be prepared to combat terrorists before they attack the state. At the same time, states that rely on the concept of preventive self-defense in situations of threat are obliged to adhere to principles such as proportionality, military necessity, collateral damage to the population and civilian infrastructure, and the humanitarian character of the actions undertaken.

In modern armed conflicts, the “line of distinction” between persons entitled to take part in hostilities and civilians has become so blurred that the practical application of the principle of distinction poses an immense challenge. Parties to the conflict, despite knowledge of the law, are not always able to clearly distinguish between civilians who are protected and civilians who have lost protection due to direct participation in hostilities. The problem is not resolved by existing legal norms.

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