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0521839769 - How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict

Ivan Arreguin-Toft

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

And there went out a champion out of the camp of the Philistines, named Goliath . . .

And all the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him, and were sore afraid . . .

And David said to Saul, Let no man's heart fail because of him; thy servant will go and fight with this Philistine . . .

And Saul armed David with his armour, and he put an helmet of brass upon his head; also he armed him with a coat of mail. And David girded his sword upon his armour . . . And David said unto Saul, I cannot go with these; for I have not proved them. And David put them off him. And he took his staff in his hand, and chose him five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in a shepherd's bag . . . and his sling was in his hand: and he drew near to the Philistine.

. . . And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field.

And David put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slang it, and smote the Philistine in his forehead . . . and he fell upon his face to the earth. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone . . .

I. Samuel 17

Why do the strong lose to the weak?

Because we expect strong actors¹ to defeat weak actors in contests ranging from wars and fist fights to business competitions

¹ "Actors" in this context mean states or coalitions of states, although the same dynamics would apply to governments fighting against rebels or rival national or ethnic groups in civil wars. "Conflicts" in this analysis mean wars (1000 battle deaths per year), although again, similar dynamics may apply in conflicts which are not wars, such as terrorism, trade wars, and labor disputes. Because this analysis focuses on explaining asymmetric conflicts I exclude those few wars in which the ratio of forces changed dramatically (toward symmetry) between the start and end of a conflict.

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and sports contests, the fact that the strong sometimes lose is puzzling.²

Relative power and realist international relations theory: the strong do as they will . . .

As far back as Thucydides' description of the wars between Athens and Sparta, the link between power and conflict outcomes has been *the* root principle of realist international relations theory.³ More power means winning wars, and less power means losing them. And defeat in war means death or slavery. This is not the same thing as saying that either international relations scholars, or political and military elites, imagine that raw material power is the only thing that explains who wins or loses a battle, campaign, or war. Many things – ranging from resolve, technology, strategy, luck, leadership, and even heroism or cowardice – can lead to unexpected outcomes. But power is useful. It is useful both because in the real world enough of it can overwhelm deficiencies in the other categories, and because in the theoretical world it is quantifiable, measurable, and comparable in a way that luck or leadership, for example, are not.

If it is true that power matters most, then in very asymmetric conflicts – conflicts between actors with wide disparities in power – the strong

² Power is one of the trickier concepts in international relations theory. Here I follow a long tradition by introducing a quantifiable proxy for power which is an admittedly imperfect one. By “strong,” for instance, I mean an actor whose relative material power exceeds that of its adversary or adversaries by large ratio (see below). “Weak” and “strong” then only have meaning in a particular dyadic context: Italy in 1935 is weak compared to the Soviet Union, but strong compared to Ethiopia. By “material power,” I mean the product of a given state's population and armed forces. Other quantifiable proxies for state power have been proposed and used over the years; including iron and steel production, gross national product (GNP), and so on. However, no single measure appears to be sufficient on its own; and GNP, perhaps on balance the most useful, suffers because these data were not kept prior to the 1920s. For a review and analysis of the literature on empirical and quantifiable measures of relative power, see Nutter, (1994: 29–49). On the empirical measurement of power in asymmetric conflicts in particular, see Paul (1994: 22).

³ My use of the term “realist IR theory” throughout this essay refers to a simple version of realist theory that has two key tenets: (1) there is no authority above states capable of regulating state interactions, and (2) all states have some capacity to harm other states. As a result, states seek to increase their relative power by various means, including buying or manufacturing armaments, and forming alliances. Power in this view is expected to have a number of positive consequences for states that acquire it: it can deter other states from attack, cow them into concessions, or defeat them in wars. For a cogent summary of realist IR theory, see Mearsheimer (2001: chapters 1–3). On the limits of power in relation to objectives, see Waltz (1979: 188–192).

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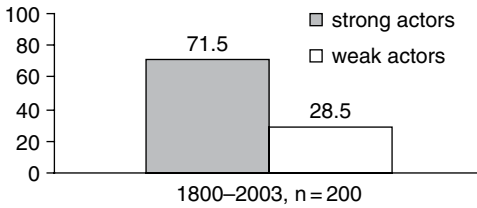


Figure 1. Percentage of asymmetric conflict victories by type of actor, 1800–2003

should always win.⁴ Indeed, a review of all asymmetric wars fought since 1800 supports this claim, as seen in Figure 1.

Again, “strong” and “weak” only have meaning in particular conflict dyads; though as noted above these may include individual actors or coalitions of actors. Moreover, in this analysis I’ve sharpened the puzzle by making the strong *much* stronger than the weak. A literally asymmetric conflict, for example, only requires a slight disparity – say, 1.1:1. But in this analysis the aim is to test competing explanations against the assertion that relative *power* matters most. For this reason the disparity in power is raised to 10:1, and then adjusted to account for the fact that strong actors – great powers and superpowers in particular – often have other security commitments that constrain the application of all their resources to a single conflict.⁵

That said, since 1816 strong actors have won more than twice as many asymmetric conflicts as weak actors. On the other hand, since in this analysis strong actors overpower weak actors by a large margin, it remains puzzling that strong actors have lost such fights as often as they have. What explains these unexpected outcomes?

A number of answers seem plausible besides bad luck. Perhaps the strong actors lost because they were squeamish in some way. Perhaps

⁴ As Mearsheimer puts it, “There are definite limits to the utility of measuring force levels. After all, even a cursory study of military history would show that it is impossible to explain the outcome of many important military campaigns by simply comparing the number of forces on each side. Nevertheless, it is clear that if one side has an overwhelming advantage in forces, the glaring asymmetry is very likely to portend a decisive victory” (Mearsheimer, 1983: 168). See also Mack (1975: 107).

⁵ “Power” in this analysis is represented as the halved product of a strong actor’s armed forces and population at the start of a conflict versus the simple product of the weak actor’s armed forces and population. Data for this survey come primarily from Small and Singer (1983), and from the 1992 revision of that data set. Additional data are from Laqueur (1976); and from Ellis (1995). For a comprehensive list of the cases used in the statistical analysis, see [Appendix](#).

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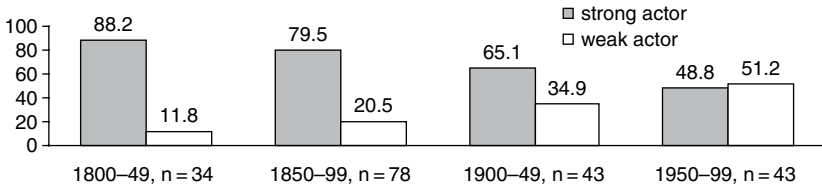
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Figure 2. Percentage of conflict victories by type of actor over time

authoritarian strong actors win asymmetric conflicts but democratic strong actors lose them. Perhaps they were irresolute, or poorly led. Perhaps weak actors had come into possession of sophisticated military technology of some sort,⁶ and this tilted the balance *enough* that strong actors lost interest in victory when the costs of conflict and occupation suddenly exceeded the expected benefits. Thinking more about it, and since these explanations seem to resonate more or less with different historical periods, it would be useful to know whether the distribution of outcomes is consistent over time.

It isn't. If the total record of asymmetric conflicts since 1816 is divided into discrete time periods, a striking trend emerges: strong actors have been losing asymmetric conflicts *more and more over time* (see Figure 2).

From 1800 until 1849, strong actors won 88.2 percent of all asymmetric conflicts. That proportion dropped slightly to 79.5 percent in the next fifty-year period. But starting in 1900, the number of asymmetric conflicts won by strong actors began to fall off significantly, down to 65.1 percent through 1949. By the last fifty-year period – 1950 to 1999 – strong actors won only 48.8 percent of all asymmetric conflicts.⁷

Here then are two puzzles represented graphically. On the one hand, realist international relations theory leads us to expect that in a two-actor conflict, the larger the ratio of forces favors one actor the more quickly and decisively that actor will win; and this is supported in

⁶ In this analysis, *technology* is presented as a power multiplier or divider, not an increment of power itself. Power is captured – crudely but sufficiently – by the multiplication of population and armed forces. This leads to some distortions – e.g., nuclear weapons and maritime *vs.* continental power distinctions do matter – but the impact of these distortions is marginal on the overall analysis.

⁷ The colonial wars that distinguish this period are arguably a special case. But, if so, they must be special in a way that overcomes the expected effects of relative power (i.e. they still challenge realist IR theory's primacy of power pillar). The overall trend is the same whether the data are divided into fifty-, ten-, or five-year periods. The four-fold division represented here is valuable analytically because it represents more data per period, and because it presents the trend more clearly. Cases from the period 2000–2010 (Afghanistan 2002, and Iraq 2003) were not included because the period has not yet lasted five years.

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Figure 1. On the other hand, strong states have *lost* nearly 30 percent of all conflicts in which they out-powered their adversaries by a factor of at least 5:1. In addition, as shown in Figure 2, strong states have been losing such fights more and more often over time. What explains this trend?

A good way to begin is to think about what was different in the early nineteenth century that may have favored strong actors so dramatically as compared to strong actors at the end of the twentieth century. Again, a number of plausible explanations come to mind. Perhaps early strong actors won because of their *technological* advantages: artillery, firearms, and blue-water navies must have been tremendous force multipliers. Perhaps the strong actor defeats concentrated in the last period were due to the rise of *national* self-determination as a norm of interstate politics? Nationalist resistance to European rule might have made conquest and occupation too costly. We might also observe that after World War I and especially World War II, the number of authoritarian strong actors declined. And, after 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and ceased to be an authoritarian actor in interstate politics. If authoritarian strong actors fight asymmetric conflicts better than democratic strong actors, perhaps the *nature of the actor* explains the trend.

This speculation points to an important utility of the trend observation independent of the fact that until recently it remained unidentified: an ideal theory of asymmetric conflict outcomes should be able to account for both the *fact* of strong actor failure and the *trend* toward increasing strong actor failure over time. Explanations of the trend which don't plausibly explain strong actor failure will be less persuasive than those which can. Also, accounts of strong actor failure inconsistent with the trend will be less persuasive than those which can explain both.

In sum, the problem with our international relations-theory-informed expectations is that they appear to be only partly right, and only in aggregate. When the aggregate data are divided into discrete time periods, the expected correlation between power and victory becomes significantly less useful as a guide to policy.

Competing explanations of asymmetric conflict outcomes

As observed by Andrew J.R. Mack more than a quarter century ago (Mack, 1975: 176), few international relations scholars have advanced explanations focused specifically on the subject of asymmetric

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conflict,⁸ and with the exception of my own work and Mack's, none has advanced a general explanation of asymmetric conflict outcomes (Arreguin-Toft, 2001).

In this book I argue that although relative power matters, the interaction of the strategies actors use matters more than how much power they have at the start of their conflict. This strategic interaction thesis may seem intuitively plausible to readers, but before its explanatory power can be evaluated competing explanations must be introduced and explored. As noted above, a good way to think about these explanations is in terms of how well they explain both the outcome and the trend puzzles.

This section offers four competing explanations of strong actor failure in asymmetric conflicts and the trend toward increasing strong actor failure. Some, such as the arms diffusion explanation or democratic social squeamishness argument, are strongest when explaining the trend, but offer equivocal explanations of why strong actors lose. Others, such as Mack's interest asymmetry argument, are good at explaining strong actor failure, but cannot account for the trend. A sound general theory of asymmetric conflict outcomes should be able to explain the fact of strong actor failure in a way consistent with the observed trend, and vice versa. What follows is an introduction to these competing explanations.⁹ In Chapter 2, the logic of each explanation

⁸ Chief among those Mack cites are Katzenbach (1962: 11–21); and Taber (1965). More recently, T. V. Paul devoted a book to the question of why the weak *start* wars against the strong. Paul's threshold of analysis for asymmetry was a power ratio of 1:2, where power was measured in traditional – that is to say, material – terms. On Paul's definition of asymmetry, see Paul (1994: 20).

⁹ These three hardly exhaust the possibilities, but they offer the strongest general explanations of both unexpected outcomes and the trend. Three additional explanations worthy of note are (1) social structure; (2) the rise of nationalism; and (3) Cold War bipolarity. The social structure argument links key aspects of a given society's social structure to the military effectiveness of the forces it is capable of fielding. In this view, the reason states such as the United States and USSR lost their respective fights against the North Vietnamese and mujahideen is because their societies were not as efficient at producing effective militaries as were the North Vietnamese and mujahideen. On the importance of social structure, see Rosen (1995: 5–31). The rise of nationalism argument is that the post-World War II period in particular was an era in which nations came to see self-determination as a necessity which could not be put off because the structural changes forced on them by colonial powers had begun to irreparably destroy their social fabric. The logic of this argument is that nationalists are more stubborn and more willing to risk death in pursuit of autonomy than people motivated by other concerns. See, e.g., Wolf (1973); and Anderson (1991: 9–10, 36). The Cold War bipolarity argument is that the USSR and United States intervened more often in order to counter the perceived interests of the other superpower. Each justified these interventions by means of domino logic,

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will be reduced to testable propositions which will later be compared in the historical case studies – some formally and some informally – against those derived from my own explanation.

The nature of the actor

One way to explain how a strong actor loses a war against a weak actor is to argue that authoritarian actors fight wars better than democratic actors.¹⁰ If true, then isolating the key differences between how each type of actor fights could explain why strong actors sometimes win asymmetric wars quickly, while other times they lose, or “win” at a cost far out of proportion to their initial estimates. If authoritarian regimes fight better than democratic regimes, and if fewer strong actors over time have been authoritarian, then this explanation could explain both the fact of strong actor failure (democratic strong actors lose asymmetric conflicts) and the trend (fewer tough authoritarian actors mean fewer strong actor victories).

Consider that authoritarian regimes are defined by several key characteristics.¹¹ First, authority for making domestic and foreign policy is restricted to a single person or a small group of people. Second, authoritarian regimes maintain strict control over the public’s access to information about the consequences of domestic and foreign policies. Finally, public attempts to criticize or change domestic or foreign policy are often punishable by severe sanctions, such as death, torture, or indefinite imprisonment.

In theory, these characteristics have four important implications for warfighting effectiveness. First, authoritarian regimes should be able to mobilize resources more effectively than democratic regimes because they control the public’s perception of a war’s legitimacy, how it is being fought by both sides, and the outcomes of specific battles. Second, on the battlefield authoritarian regimes can coerce their soldiers to fight

which inflated even minor skirmishes into conflicts of vital importance in the struggle between the West and the Socialist world. In other words, bipolarity implies the reduction of all extra-core fights to mere proxy wars between the United States and USSR. This is another way of saying that due to constant US and Soviet support and interference there effectively *were* no asymmetric conflicts during the Cold War.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive introduction to the question of regime type and military effectiveness, see Desch (2002: 5–47). For a pessimistic view of the military effectiveness of democratic regime types at war, see, e.g., Waltz (1967); LeMay and Smith (1968: vii–viii); Blaufarb and Tanham (1989); and especially Iklé (1991: xiv).

¹¹ Mack discounts the argument that regime type matters in asymmetric conflicts. See Mack (1975: 188–189).

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by threatening to execute them for “cowardice,” where cowardice is defined as any hesitation to engage the enemy regardless of objective circumstances. Third, authoritarian soldiers may not be constrained by the laws of war regarding noncombatants such as prisoners of war and civilians in combat zones. Instead of having to provide captured enemy soldiers with food and medical services, for example, an authoritarian regime’s soldiers may be ordered to murder them, thus conserving resources. Finally, lack of responsibility to a cost-bearing public may allow authoritarian regimes to sustain higher combat casualties in pursuit of military objectives than can democratic regimes.

If an axiomatically just cause, just conduct, fearless soldiers, disregard for the laws of war, and casualty insensitivity make authoritarian regimes more effective in battle than democratic regimes, then the trend toward increasing strong actor failure would have to be explained by the fact of decreasing participation in asymmetric conflicts by authoritarian strong actors. This seems intuitively persuasive: the progressive dissolution of authoritarian states after 1918 (Austria-Hungary, the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire), 1945 (the Third Reich, fascist Italy, and imperial Japan) and 1991 (the Soviet Union) implies fewer authoritarian strong actors involved in asymmetric conflicts.

Problems with the argument

But there are a number of problems with both the logic of the nature-of-actor argument and the evidence used to support that logic. First, even assuming that there are real differences in the capabilities of authoritarian and democratic actors in war, why assume that regime types stay constant in war? Most democratic actors become more conservative in war, restricting many of the civil liberties that define them *as* democracies (one thinks most famously of the fate of Japanese Americans in the United States after December 1941). Authoritarian regimes may also become more liberal under stress: Stalin’s rehabilitation of the Orthodox church during World War II is a classic example. And the threat need not be existential to have this effect: the United States passed the USA Patriot act – which allowed the state greater freedom to pry into the private affairs of its citizens – in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Second, an authoritarian regime’s control over information about the justness of a war only benefits a regime that wishes to fight a war its own public would otherwise think unjust. The argument therefore *generally* assumes that publics in authoritarian regimes would consider

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their government's wars unjust, when there's no way to know, *a priori*, whether this is likely. Moreover, even assuming total resource mobilization, the tight control of information necessary to achieve that efficiency may impose severe limitations on the total amount of resources available to mobilize in the first place: the command economies typical of authoritarian regimes are notorious for being inefficient. This is the unifying theme of a number of recent comparisons of authoritarian and democratic regimes at war. According to this very sound logic, democratic states will, all other things being equal, be relatively more effective at fighting and winning wars than authoritarian states.¹² The use of extreme coercive measures to motivate soldiers is also logically suspect. Regimes resorting to these methods may achieve a tactical advantage in rare circumstances, but such a system can only motivate soldiers to take actions they know to be excessively costly or futile. To soldiers as yet uncommitted, this would signal that their leaders care nothing for their lives, and thus ultimately decrease their combat effectiveness. Such soldiers may desert at any opportunity, and cease to function without the threat of harsh reprisals. They may even resort to murdering their commanders. The systematic harm of noncombatants – a strategy referred to here as barbarism – also has drawbacks. For one thing, it is technically quite difficult to murder prisoners or noncombatants without one's opponents finding out about it. Once they do, they fight harder, avoiding surrender at all costs (they also often start reprisals in kind). Another problem is that sustained resort to barbarism ruins soldiers for conventional missions:¹³ Here Richard Rhodes records the complaint by Eastern Territories Commander Johannes Blaskowitz of "excesses" by Heinrich Himmler's *Einsatzgruppen* in Poland in a memo to the German High Command:

It is wholly misguided to slaughter a few ten thousand Jews and Poles as is happening at the moment; for this will neither destroy the idea of

¹² See Lake (1992); Reiter and Stam (1998: 259); and Reiter and Stam (2002). On the contrary argument that regime type doesn't matter much, see Desch (2002).

¹³ See, e.g., Stanislas Andreski, who argues that Latin America has had few interstate wars because its states have soldiers who specialize in domestic oppression (torture, murder, rape, and so on) (Andreski, 1968). The logic is the same: soldiers used for barbarism will become ineffective as regular combat soldiers, putting states who face threats from other states' regular soldiers at increased risk. This logic is supported by a study of military disintegration by Bruce Watson. Watson argues that when, for example, a platoon of the US Army 20th Infantry Division under the command of Lieutenant William Calley murdered civilians in the village of My Lai in 1968, they were not acting as soldiers, but as a mob. See Watson (1997: 151).

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a Polish state in the eyes of the mass of the population, nor do away with the Jews . . .

The worst damage affecting Germans which has developed as a result of the present conditions, however, is the tremendous brutalization and moral depravity which is spreading rapidly among precious German manpower like an epidemic. (Rhodes, 2002: 9–10)

This is why authoritarian regimes who resort to this strategy almost invariably develop “special forces” or “para” militaries to do the work. Even *within* the Einsatzgruppen, Himmler worried that certain practices (e.g., the unauthorized murder of Jews by SS units tasked with other functions) would damage discipline and hence, mission effectiveness (Rhodes, 2002: 187). Finally, the ratio of acceptable combat casualties to the value of military objectives should logically depend on the relative populations of the combatants, not their regime types: a small authoritarian regime could not win by selling its soldiers lives cheaply for objectives that in any other regime type would matter little.

On the evidence side, the nature-of-actor argument is difficult to support in its general form, because authoritarian regimes don’t win wars more often than democratic regimes. This would appear to limit the power of this explanation to account for unexpected asymmetric conflict outcomes.

On balance then, although the nature-of-actor argument may offer important insights into key causes of strong actor failure, by itself it is unlikely to stand as a sound general explanation of why strong actors lose asymmetric conflicts.

Arms diffusion

A second explanation for strong actor failure begins by observing the trend that accelerated after World War II. During the war, Allied and Axis powers struggled to defeat each other in the developing world. Throughout Asia and Africa, in particular, both sides shipped, stored, and distributed relatively sophisticated small arms and ammunition, including semi-automatic rifles, portable mortars, hand grenades, and machine guns. After the war, these arms remained in the developing world, along with a considerable number of indigenous soldiers expert in their effective use.¹⁴ When colonial powers returned to their former

¹⁴ Examples include the Hukbalahap in the Philippines and the Malayan communists in Malaya. For an account of the Hukbalahap insurgency in the Philippines from the insurgent perspective, see Pomeroy (1964). For an account of the Malayan Emergency and British responses to it, see Thompson (1966); Stubbs (1989); and Ramakrishna (2002).