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

Ivan Arreguin-Toft

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How the Weak Win Wars

How do the weak win wars? The likelihood of victory and defeat in asymmetric conflicts depends on the interaction of the strategies weak and strong actors use. Using statistical and in-depth historical analyses of conflicts spanning two hundred years, Ivan Arreguin-Toft shows that, independent of regime type and weapons technology, the interaction of similar strategic approaches favors strong actors, while opposite strategic approaches favor the weak. This new approach to understanding asymmetric conflicts allows us to make sense of how the United States was able to win its war in Afghanistan (2002) in a few months, while the Soviet Union lost after a decade of brutal war (1979–1989). Arreguin-Toft's strategic interaction theory has implications not only for international relations theory, but for policymakers grappling with interstate and civil wars, as well as terrorism.

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To Monica

Epigraph

Do not press a desperate enemy

Sun Tzu

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Preface

This is a book about power, and how common understandings about power can lead to disaster.

The term “asymmetric conflict” is meant to bracket the broad topic of inquiry in the fewest words and syllables – yet it suffers from a whiff of academic conceit and ivory tower detachment.

The real topic at hand is naked brutality.

In war the primary recipients of this brutality should be soldiers. They are trained to supply it, within limits; and they expect to be injured or killed by other soldiers in the course of their duties. But nowadays war’s brutality is less and less often restricted to soldiers (some would say it is a myth that it ever was). It is perhaps an unintended consequence of the attempt to use the Geneva Conventions (and subsequent instruments of international humanitarian law) to protect infants, the injured, the sick, the mentally ill, the crippled, small children, women who do not bear arms, and the elderly, that it is precisely *these* human beings, and not soldiers, who have increasingly become targets of knives, rifle butts, flame, and flying metal. They are targets because desperate men find it useful to shelter behind and among them, while their enemies lack either the will or the ability to strike them without also striking say, the nine-year-old girl huddled nearby.

In asymmetric conflicts – those in which one side is possessed of overwhelming power with respect to its adversary – this is especially true. It is true because the weak *are* desperate. It is true also because the strong cannot abide the offense of resistance: if power demands obedience then resistance to overwhelming power supplies proof of evil or madness; and neither the evil nor the mad need be treated as fellow human beings.

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The real brutality of war is missing from most social science analyses of war. It is missing because we are *ignorant*: most of us have never directly experienced the horror whose analysis has become our life's work. It is missing because it is *necessary*: to get close to the reality of our subject would be intolerable, unbearable. And some cruelties cannot be described. There are simply no words in any language capable of bearing the weight of their experience. Finally, the brutality of war is missing from most social science analyses because it is *useful*: it allows us to detect patterns and make generalizations that may someday persuade others to alter how conflicts are resolved – to end those ongoing and to prevent them from escalating to violence altogether.

It is in this spirit I offer this analysis, flaws and all.

Acknowledgments

I have read many of these acknowledgments sections over the years. They almost always strike me as alternately maudlin and boring. Mine will be no different.

I was trained at the University of Chicago in the last decade of the twentieth century. It was a challenging process. One might call it benign neglect; intended – designed even – to enable me to recognize, frame, and answer good questions with little help beyond my own resources. To two of my mentors then, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, I owe thanks for my intellectual self-sufficiency. Like an Army Ranger I can now be dropped solo into an academic wilderness and I will always find my way, survive, and fulfill my mission.

But the ability to work alone has not altered my inclination to work with others, nor in any way dulled my love of teaching. I owe thanks to more colleagues at the University of Chicago than I can list here. But for good conversations, penetrating criticism, and unstinting support I especially want to thank Ann Davies, Sharon Morris, Jordan Seng, David Michel, Kim Germain, Brett Klopp, Andy Kydd, Susan Liebell, John McCormick, Jen Mitzen, David Edelstein, and Paul Kapur.

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Abbreviations

ARVN	Army of Vietnam
COIN	Counterinsurgency
DMZ	demilitarized zone
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale
GVN	Government of Vietnam
GWS	guerrilla warfare strategy
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
SAM	surface-to-air missile
VC	Viet Cong