

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 Arreguín-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). Arreguín-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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A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict

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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.

Preface

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

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.

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).



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.

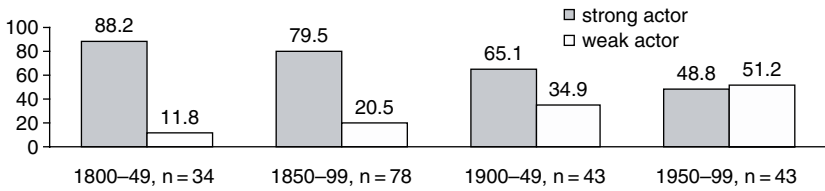


Figure 2. Percentage of conflict victories by type of actor over time

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.