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Book Review: *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*

by Timothy Richardson

Ivan, Arreguin-Toft. *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*. Cambridge studies in International Relations, 99. New York: Cambridge University Press, 250 pages, 2005. ISBN: 0521548691 Paperback \$41.00

The military prowess of the United States would seem to be unrivalled in the 21st century. Yet a decade into the new century, the United States is still engaged in the longest war of its history in Afghanistan against a weaker, non-state actor, with no end in sight. Why? In his 2005 book, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, Ivan Arreguin-Toft offers insight into the reasons why strong actors, such as the United States, often lose to weak actors in an asymmetric conflict. He not only provides sound logic detailing his Strategic Interaction (STRATINT) theory to explain why weak actors defeat strong actors, but he also outlines the growing post-World War II trend marking the increased winning percentage of weak actors in asymmetric conflicts. Given the United States' efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq this past decade, few would argue against the prediction that the United States will continue to be engaged in small, asymmetric wars against militarily inferior adversaries for the foreseeable future. More importantly, one could perceive that because the United States has such an overwhelming military superiority that it did not plan for, or was not prepared for, the strategy of its adversary. As such, Arreguin-Toft's STRATINT theory is relevant, compelling, and well-supported. Moreover, it is a great follow-on to other prominent asymmetric conflict theories proposed by Andrew Mack and Gil Merom, and is an essential read for defense planners, as well as IR scholars and students.

Arreguin-Toft opens the book by outlining the importance of studying asymmetric conflict and demonstrates the trend that strong actors have been losing asymmetric conflicts at a greater rate over time. In addition, he reviews and challenges other prominent theories attempting to explain asymmetric conflict outcomes. These theories include political vulnerability based on regime type and conflict length, arms diffusion, and interest asymmetry. Arreguin-Toft does a great job detailing why these theories may be necessary conditions, but they are not sufficient conditions to explain asymmetric conflict outcomes. Furthermore, they fall short in explaining the growing trend of strong actor losses (depicted below).



The chart above is represented as Figure 2 in *How the Weak Win Wars*.

Arreguin-Toft then outlines his STRATINT theory, which simply states that victory and defeat in asymmetric conflict depends on the military strategy used by both the strong and weak actors. If the strong actor employs the correct (or same) strategy as the weaker opponent, then the realism theory of relative power holds, and the strong actor wins over 75 percent of the time. However, if the strong actor chooses the wrong (or opposite) strategy in relation to its opponent, then the weak actor wins over 60 percent of the conflict engagements contrary to the theory of relative power. Arreguin-Toft breaks down the STRATINT possibilities into four scenarios with each actor controlling what strategy it employs. In simple terms, the strong actor can either employ a direct or indirect strategy, and the weak actor can choose either a direct or indirect strategy. He further defines direct versus indirect for each actor based on the following typology. In a direct-direct engagement, strong actors use a conventional attack and the weak actor uses a conventional defense. In an indirect-indirect engagement, the strong actor uses a strategy of barbarism and the weak actor employs a guerilla warfare strategy.

Weak Actor Strategic Approach		
	Direct	Indirect
Strong Actor	Strong Actor	Weak Actor
Strategic Approach	Weak Actor	Strong Actor

The table above outlines the four possible strategic interactions and the expected conflict outcomes. This table is listed as Figure 3 in *How the Weak Win Wars*.

Arreguin-Toft's choice of the terms "barbarism" and "guerilla warfare" to describe respective indirect strategies are problematic; however, they do not detract from his intent or argument. Certainly barbaric methods are not limited to strong actors when one considers acts of terrorism, which are typically employed by weak actors often with the sole intent of intimidating and harming non-combatants. Similarly, guerilla warfare tactics are not limited to just weak actors. A generic term such as unconventional for both actors would have been more appropriate.

From a statistical analysis standpoint, Arreguin-Toft's results are compelling. To arrive at these numbers Arreguin-Toft conducted a Large-N study using the *Correlates of War* data set

and he coded 202 asymmetric conflicts fought between 1816 and 2003. To determine asymmetry, “[a] conflict was coded asymmetric if the halved product of one actor’s armed forces and population exceeded the simple product of its adversary’s armed forces and population by 5:1 or more.” Critics may challenge the method Arreguin-Toft used to code the data; however, even if a more precise method is determined it is unlikely to change the results in determining the outcome of strong versus weak actor conflicts. One could further analyze the number of forces employed (vice available) by a strong actor in relation to a weak actor. In addition to Arreguin-Toft’s STRATINT theory, the weight of effort used by the strong actor may be an additional variable to examine.

The strength of Arreguin-Toft’s STRATINT argument lies in his case study analysis in which he was not only able to test his hypothesis, but also examine competing explanations of asymmetric conflict results. Arreguin-Toft devotes a chapter to analyzing each of the following five historical case studies: the Murid War 1830-1859; the South African War 1899-1902; the Italo-Ethiopian War 1935-1940; the Vietnam War 1965-1973; and the Afghan Civil War 1965-1973. In each of the case studies, Arreguin-Toft judiciously applied the competing theories of asymmetric conflict outcome against his own argument. He identified each theory’s strengths and weaknesses as they applied to each case, and soundly demonstrated the completeness of his STRATINT reasoning to explain asymmetric conflict outcomes. For example, in the South African War (aka Boer War), which pitted the British (strong actor) against a significantly weaker Orange Free State and Transvaal (weak actor), the British simply steamrolled the Boer Army in a direct-direct (conventional-conventional) conflict. However, Arreguin-Toft points out that in 1900 the Boers shifted their strategy to an indirect/guerilla warfare approach, which caused a delay in the war’s end, because it took the British time to shift to an indirect/barbarism strategy. Once the British did switch strategies that resulted in an indirect-indirect STRATINT, the strong actor prevailed and the war quickly ended. Arreguin-Toft goes on to acknowledge this is almost the exact scenario that has played out following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and therefore the relevance of STRATINT to policy makers in today’s conflicts.

Arreguin-Toft is also prudent to identify the limits of STRATINT and to acknowledge where the other prominent theories can help fill the gaps. For example, in his analysis of the Afghan civil war, Arreguin-Toft detailed the strength of the weapons diffusion argument. He highlighted that by 1986, the Soviet Union had shifted its direct/conventional strategy to combat the Mujahideen’s indirect/guerilla warfare approach. The Soviet change brought initial success as they began employing special operations forces to conduct helicopter assaults, and used blocking forces to minimize enemy escape routes. However, the Mujahideen were able to quickly overcome the Soviet tactical advantage through the use of US shoulder-fired Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Therefore, Arreguin-Toft acknowledged that while STRATINT theory explains the Soviet failure during the initial phase of the war when it used a direct/conventional strategy against the Mujahideen indirect/guerilla warfare approach, it fails to explain the Soviet defeat and subsequent withdrawal even when the conflict was indirect-indirect.

In the final section, Arreguin-Toft outlines policy implications for his STRATINT theory and argues the need for the United States to build two militaries: one to fight conventional wars (direct), and one to defend America’s interests in small wars and against terrorism (indirect). Moreover, he provides candid feedback to US policy makers such that the nature of current and future conflicts will increasingly pit the US against weak actors using indirect methods. The bottom-line is terrorists and insurgents are difficult to defeat, even when employing the right

strategy. Therefore, Arreguin-Toft contends the US must use discriminate force and adopt political and economic reforms that isolate weak actors from their support base. Arreguin-Toft writes: “If the United States wants to win wars it must build two different militaries. If it wants to win the peace—a far more ambitious goal—it must support its resort to arms by eliminating foreign policy double standards and by increasing its capacity and willingness to use methods other than violence to resolve or deter conflicts around the world.” (p. 227)

The combination of empirical and qualitative analysis, coupled with his direct challenge of competing theories makes Arreguin-Toft’s STRATINT theory a compelling argument. In the social science realm, any theory that can explain a complex phenomenon such as asymmetric conflict outcome over 75% of the time is tremendous. Yet, the nature of warfare is unique in that the gap between theory and reality is often filled by the lives of brave young men and women sent to fight its nation’s wars. In short, 75% is not good enough. As such, Arreguin-Toft’s work is an excellent launch point to conduct further analysis on asymmetric conflict.

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