How the Weak Win Wars

A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict

Ivan Arreguín-Toft

No one had given Muhammad Ali a chance against George Foreman in the World Heavyweight Championship fight of October 30, 1974. Foreman, none of whose opponents had lasted more than three rounds in the ring, was the strongest, hardest hitting boxer of his generation. Ali, though not as powerful as Foreman, had a slightly faster punch and was lighter on his feet. In the weeks leading up to the fight, however, Foreman had practiced against nimble sparring partners. He was ready. But when the bell rang just after 4:00 A.M. in Kinshasa, something completely unexpected happened. In round two, instead of moving into the ring to meet Foreman, Ali appeared to cower against the ropes. Foreman, now confident of victory, pounded him again and again, while Ali whispered hoarse taunts: "George, you're not *hittin'*," "George, you *disappoint* me." Foreman lost his temper, and his punches became a furious blur. To spectators, unaware that the elastic ring ropes were absorbing much of the force of Foreman's blows, it looked as if Ali would surely fall. By the fifth round, however, Foreman was worn out. And in round eight, as stunned commentators and a delirious crowd looked on, Muhammad Ali knocked George Foreman to the canvas, and the fight was over.

The outcome of that now-famous "rumble in the jungle" was completely unexpected. The two fighters were equally motivated to win: Both had boasted of victory, and both had enormous egos. Yet in the end, a fight that should have been over in three rounds went eight, and Foreman's prodigious punches proved useless against Ali's rope-a-dope strategy.

This fight illustrates an important yet relatively unexplored feature of interstate conflict: how a weak actor's strategy can make a strong actor's power ir-

Ivan Arreguín-Toft is a postdoctoral fellow in the International Security Program at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

The author wishes to thank Stephen Biddle, David Edelstein, John Garafano, Charles Glaser, John Mearsheimer, Sharon Morris, Jordan Seng, Jessica Stern, Ward Thomas, Monica Toft, Stephen Walt, participants in the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago, participants in the 1999–2000 National Security Seminar at the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. He also gratefully acknowledges support from the Institute for the Study of World Politics and the Smith Richardson Foundation.

International Security, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), pp. 93–128

relevant.[1] If power implies victory in war, then weak actors should almost never win against stronger opponents, especially when the gap in relative power is very large.[2] Yet history suggests otherwise: Weak actors sometimes do win.[3] The question is how.

Understanding the conditions under which weak actors win wars is important for two reasons. First, if there are dynamics unique to asymmetric conflicts—or if their analysis provides fresh insights into symmetrical conflicts—a general explanation of asymmetric conflict outcomes is not only desirable but necessary, both to reduce the likelihood of unwinnable wars and to increase the chances of U.S. success when a resort to arms is necessary. Second, because asymmetric conflicts ranging from catastrophic terrorism to military intervention in interstate, ethnic, and civil wars are the most likely threat to U.S. security and interests, only a general theory of asymmetric conflict outcomes can guide U.S. policymakers in their efforts to build the kinds of armed and other forces necessary to implement an effective U.S. strategic response.

Thus far, only one scholar has advanced a strong general explanation of asymmetric conflict outcomes.[4] In "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," Andrew Mack argues that an actor's relative resolve or interest explains success or failure in asymmetric conflicts.[5] In essence, the actor with the most resolve

1. "Actors" here mean states or coalitions of states, although the same dynamics would apply to governments fighting against rebels. "Conflicts" in this analysis are restricted to wars (1,000 battle deaths per year on average), although again, similar dynamics may apply in conflicts that are not wars (e.g., terrorism, trade wars, and labor disputes). Because this analysis focuses on explaining asymmetric conflicts, it excludes those few wars in which the ratio of forces changed dramatically (toward symmetry) between the conflict's beginning and end.

2. In this article I follow established practice by introducing an imperfect but quantifiable proxy for power. A strong actor is one whose material power exceeds that of its adversary or adversaries by at least ten to one. Material power is the product of a given state's population and armed forces. "Strong" and "weak" therefore have meaning only in a particular dyadic context: Italy in 1935 is weak compared with Nazi Germany, but strong compared with Ethiopia. For an introduction to the literature on empirical and quantifiable measures of relative power, see John Jacob Nutter, "Unpacking Threat: A Conceptual and Formal Analysis," in Norman A. Graham, ed., *Seeking Security and Development: The Impact of Military Spending and Arms Transfers* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1994), pp. 29–49.

3. T.V. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 4. Paul's analysis focuses on why weak states initiate wars against stronger ones. His threshold of analysis for asymmetry is a power ratio of 1:2, where power is measured in traditional—that is, material—terms. On Paul's definition of asymmetry, see ibid., p. 20. On the problems of reducing power to material net assessments, see ibid., p. 22; Nutter, "Unpacking Threat"; and Michael P. Fischerkeller, "David versus Goliath: Cultural Judgments in Asymmetric Wars," *Security Studies,* Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer 1998), pp. 1–43.

4. See Andrew J.R. Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics,* Vol. 27, No. 2 (January 1975), pp. 175–200.

5. Robert A. Pape considers Mack's explanation as part of a family of balance-of-interest arguments, which closely approach balance-of-resolve arguments. I agree that they are analytically dis-

wins, regardless of material power resources. Mack contends that this resolve can be derived a priori by assessing the structure of the conflict relationship. Power asymmetry explains interest asymmetry: The greater the gap in relative power, the less resolute and hence more politically vulnerable strong actors are, and the more resolute and less politically vulnerable weak actors are. Big nations therefore lose small wars because frustrated publics (in democratic regimes) or countervailing elites (in authoritarian regimes) force a withdrawal short of military victory. This seems true of some conflicts, but not of others.

In this article I argue that the best predictor of asymmetric conflict outcomes is strategic interaction.[6] According to this thesis, the interaction of actor strategies during a conflict predicts conflict outcomes better than do competing explanations.[7] The first section lays out the puzzle of strong-actor defeat in asymmetric conflicts and Mack's interest asymmetry argument more fully. The second section introduces the strategic interaction thesis, which holds that strong actors will lose asymmetric conflicts when they use the wrong strategy vis-à-vis their opponents' strategy. The next two sections offer quantitative and qualitative tests of the argument. The article concludes by drawing out theoretical and policy implications of the strategic interaction thesis and suggests avenues for further research.

---

tinct, but this distinction does not matter in practice because the two motives invariably move in the same direction: High interest implies high resolve, and vice versa. I therefore use the two terms interchangeably. See Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 4, n. 9.

6. My use of the term strategic interaction should not be confused with its usage in formal models in which strategy is invoked as both a proxy for actor rationality (i.e., strategic actors calculate risks and benefits) and an attribute of states, especially great powers. See, for example, Curtis S. Signorino, "Strategic Interaction and the Statistical Analysis of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review,* Vol. 93, No. 2 (June 1999), p. 279. On the distinction between rational choice treatments of strategy and strategy as traditionally used in strategic studies, see Pape, *Bombing to Win,* pp. 8–9.

7. Among these are nature of actor, arms diffusion, and rise of nationalism arguments. The logic of the nature of actor argument is that because (1) democratic actors do not fight as well as authoritarian actors, and (2) an increase in strong-actor failures in asymmetric conflicts correlates with an increase in the total number of asymmetric conflicts involving democratic strong actors, actor regime type explains asymmetric conflict outcomes. See Michael C. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Does Not Matter (Much)," unpublished manuscript, University of Kentucky, September 2000. The arms diffusion argument is a strand of offense-defense theory that holds that the diffusion of relatively advanced small arms to the developing world caused the costs of conquest or occupation to rise sufficiently to offset expected benefits. On offense-defense theory in general, see Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies,* Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 660–691. The rise of nationalism argument holds that after World War II, nations came to believe that only through self-determination could they prevent colonialist destruction of their social fabric. In this view, the costs of conquest and occupation rose because nationalists are generally more stubborn, and more willing than others, to risk death in pursuit of autonomy. See, for example, Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

Explaining Asymmetric Conflict Outcomes

Since Thucydides, the root principle of international relations theory has been that power implies victory in war.[8] Thus, in asymmetric conflicts[9] the strong actor should almost always win. Indeed this expectation is on balance supported (see Figure 1). Yet if one divides the roughly 200-year period covered in the *Correlates of War* data set, two related puzzles emerge (see Figure 2). First, weak actors were victorious in nearly 30 percent of all asymmetric wars, which seems high given the ≥ 5:1 asymmetry represented here. Second, weak actors have won with increasing frequency over time. If relative power explains outcomes, and structure of the conflict is held constant as in Figure 2, conflict outcomes should not shift over time as they have. What explains both strong-actor defeat in asymmetric wars and the trend toward increasing weak-actor victories over time?

Interest asymmetry, or relative power revisited

Andrew Mack's explanation for how weak states win asymmetric wars comprises three key elements: (1) relative power explains relative interests; (2) relative interests explain relative political vulnerability; and (3) relative vulnerability explains why strong actors lose. According to the logic of this argument, strong actors have a lower interest in winning because their survival is not at stake. Weak actors, on the other hand, have a high interest in winning because only victory ensures their survival.[10] Mack introduces the concept of political vulnerability to describe the likelihood that an actor's public (in democratic

8. Throughout this article the term international relations theory refers to a simple version of realist theory with three key elements: (1) there is no authority above states that is capable of regulating their interactions; (2) all states have some capacity to harm other states; and (3) states therefore seek to increase their relative power, which can deter other states from launching attacks, intimidate them into making concessions, or defeat them in war.

9. In this analysis the threshold of asymmetry that matters is ≥ 5:1 in favor of strong actors, where power is 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. Halving strong-actor power simulates the tendency of strong actors to have diverse security interests and commitments. Data for this survey come primarily from J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816–1980* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1992). Additional data are from Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla: A Historical and Critical Study* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976); and John Ellis, *From the Barrel of a Gun: A History of Guerrilla, Revolutionary, and Counter-Insurgency Warfare, from the Romans to the Present* (London: Greenhill, 1995). Cases used in this analysis are listed in the appendix.

10. The classic work on this point is Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing. See Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 190. See also Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," p. 181.

Figure 1. Percentage of Asymmetric Conflict Victories by Type of Actor, 1800–1998.

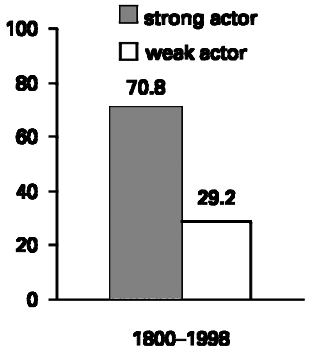
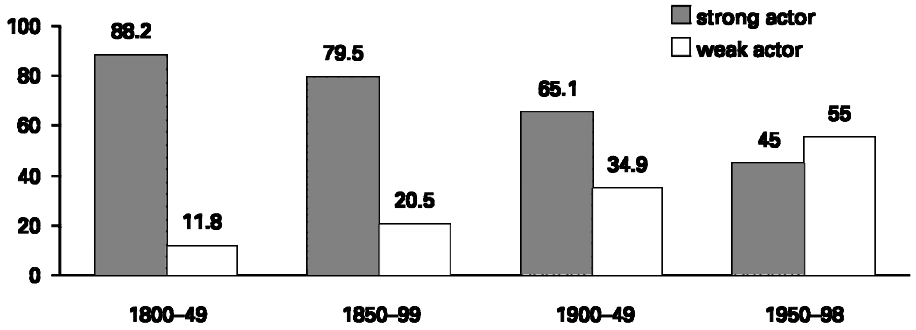


Figure 2. Percentage of Asymmetric Conflict Victories by Type of Actor in Four Fifty-Year Periods.



regimes) or competing elites (in authoritarian regimes) will force its leaders to halt the war short of achieving its initial objectives.[11] A strong actor's low interests imply high political vulnerability. In contrast, a weak actor's high interests imply low political vulnerability. Mack argues that this political vulnerability explains why the strong lose to the weak:[12] Delays and reverses on the battle-field will eventually encourage war-weary publics or greedy elites to force the strong actor's leaders to abandon the fight. Mack's argument therefore reduces to the claim that relative power explains strong-actor defeat in asymmetric wars: Power asymmetry determines interest asymmetry (high power equals low interest). Interest asymmetry is the key

11. Ibid., pp. 180–182.
12. Ibid., pp. 194–195.

causal mechanism, and Mack's thesis is in this sense an interest asymmetry argument.

Mack applies this logic to the case of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, where it appears to provide a strong explanation of that war's unexpected outcome. According to Mack, the United States lost the war because it had less at stake than did North Vietnam. Over time the United States failed to coerce North Vietnam and was eventually forced by an angry and frustrated American public to withdraw short of achieving its main political objective: a viable, independent, noncommunist South Vietnam.

Mack's interest asymmetry thesis has at least three problems. First, relative power is a poor predictor of relative interest or resolve in peace or war. In peacetime, a strong state may act as if its survival is at stake when it is not. A state that imagines itself "leader of the free world," for example, might rationally calculate that although the defeat of an ally in a distant civil war would be materially insignificant, its own survival as a free-world leader depends on a favorable outcome. These calculations are often intensified by domino logic, in which a series of individually insignificant interests are linked so that their cumulative loss constitutes a material threat to survival. Prior to the South African War (1899–1902),[13] for example, Great Britain had calculated that the fate of its empire hinged on protecting India, which demanded that Britain secure the sea-lanes of communication passing the Cape of Good Hope. This in turn required control of Cape Colony, which made it imperative to resist with force the independence demands of two tiny republics in the hinterlands of the southernmost region of Africa. Similarly, both identity survival and domino rationales influenced the U.S. decision to intervene in the civil war in Vietnam.[14] Once strong actors enter into a conflict—even one acknowledged to have been initially peripheral to their interests—their resolve to win may increase dramatically. This was as true of Soviet calculations in Afghanistan as it was of U.S. calculations in Vietnam.[15] Second, the operation of political vulnerability, which Mack uses to explain weak-actor success, presupposes a span of

13. The South African War is what historians formerly called the Boer War. The new name more accurately reflects the important role played by black South Africans in the war, and for this reason I refer to the Boer War as the South African War throughout this article.
14. See, for example, George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 170; and Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), pp. 169–170, 377–378, 399, 423.
15. On Soviet calculations in Afghanistan, see Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1998), pp. 68, 122. For particularly apt examples from the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, see Herring, *America's Longest War,* p. 222.

time. But nothing in the interest asymmetry thesis explains why some asymmetric conflicts end quickly, yet others drag on.[16] Third, if the interest asymmetry thesis is right, there should be little or no variation over time in the distribution of asymmetric conflict outcomes when relative power is held constant. But as shown in Figure 2 (in which relative power is held constant), weak actors are increasingly winning asymmetric conflicts.

In sum, Mack's interest asymmetry thesis is weakest when explaining actor interests as a function of relative power, and strongest when explaining strong-actor failure as a consequence of political vulnerability. In the next section I present a theory of asymmetric conflict outcomes that subsumes Mack's thesis by bracketing the conditions under which political vulnerability causes strong actors to lose asymmetric wars.

The Strategic Interaction Thesis: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict

This section introduces the strategic interaction thesis as a general explanation of asymmetric conflict outcomes. It begins with definitions of key terms, followed by an exploration of the theory's logic, and concludes with several derived hypotheses.

STRATEGY

Strategy, as defined here, refers to an actor's plan for using armed forces to achieve military or political objectives.[17] Strategies incorporate an actor's understanding (rarely explicit) about the relative values of these objectives.[18] In

16. Mack recognizes this problem explicitly, by suggesting that guerrilla warfare strategy explains the longer duration of asymmetric conflicts. See Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," p. 195. But this argument suffers from two related problems: (1) weak actors do not always defend with guerrilla warfare (this limits the generality of Mack's theory); and (2) some defenders using guerrilla warfare strategy are defeated quickly (this limits his theory's explanatory power).

17. The meaning of strategy is both complicated and constantly evolving. John J. Mearsheimer uses perhaps the simplest definition—"the plan of attack." See Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 28–29. For a discussion of strategy and its evolution, see B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy,* 2d ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), pp. 333–346; and J.P. Charnay, "Strategy," in André Corvisier and John Childs, eds., Chris Turner, trans., *A Dictionary of Military History and the Art of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 768–774.

18. This lack of explicitness is an important component of strategy because guessing wrong about how an adversary values its objectives can lead to unexpected outcomes. U.S. strategy in Vietnam, for example, assumed that after sustaining a certain level of casualties, North Vietnam would no longer be willing to support the insurgency in the South. The search for this breaking point, and uncertainty over whether it would have any political utility, bitterly divided the Johnson administration. There may in fact have been a breaking point in Vietnam, but as U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara concluded in 1967, reaching that point would have resulted in virtual genocide.

this sense, strategy should be distinguished from two closely related terms: grand strategy and tactics. Grand strategy refers to the totality of an actor's resources directed toward military, political, economic, or other objectives. Tactics refers to the art of fighting battles and of using the various arms of the military—for example, infantry, armor, and artillery—on terrain and in positions that are favorable to them.[19] Grand strategy, strategy, and tactics all describe different points on a continuum of a given actor's means toward a single end: compelling another to do its will.

The following typology of ideal-type strategies is a useful starting point for analysis:

Attack (strong actor) strategies:
1. direct attack
2. barbarism

Defense (weak actor) strategies:
1. direct defense
2. guerrilla warfare strategy

This typology includes two assumptions: (1) strong actors initiated the asymmetric conflict in question, and therefore "strong actor" and "attacker" are synonymous;[20] and (2) these ideal-type strategies are war-winning rather than war-termination strategies.[21]

DIRECT ATTACK. Direct attack means the use of the military to capture or eliminate an adversary's armed forces, thereby gaining control of that opponent's values. The main goal is to win the war by destroying the adversary's capacity to resist with armed forces. Both attrition and blitzkrieg are direct-

---

See Steven Rosen, "War Power and the Willingness to Suffer," in Bruce M. Russett, ed., *Peace, War, and Numbers* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1972), pp. 167–168; John Mueller, "The Search for the 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam: The Statistics of a Deadly Quarrel," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1980), pp. 497–519; Frederick Z. Brown, "Comment on Mueller: American Misperceptions," ibid., pp. 525–529; and Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* pp. 454, 596.

19. This definition of tactics is a paraphrase of one from the *Littré Dictionary* as quoted by Charnay, "Strategy," p. 770.

20. Of course, empirically, strong actors are not always the initiators in asymmetric conflicts. Paul counts twenty weak-actor-initiated conflicts from 394 B.C. to 1993, of which eleven are included here. See Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts,* pp. 3–4.

21. In eight asymmetric conflicts (4.1 percent), the outcome was affected by a war termination or conciliation strategy. Conciliation strategies include the use of bribes, offers of amnesty, power sharing, and political reforms, and do not require armed forces to implement. Examples of asymmetric conflicts that ended as the result of a conciliation strategy include the Murid War (1830–59), the Third Seminole War (1855–58), the Malayan emergency (1948–57), the British-Cypriot conflict (1954–59), and the Philippine-Moro conflict (1972–80).

attack strategies.[22] Some readers may find inclusion of the blitzkrieg in this definition puzzling, because it seems the very definition of an indirect attack strategy.[23] But because armored formations target enemy armed forces (the adversary's *capacity* to resist) in a blitzkrieg, it counts as an indirect tactic but a direct strategy.[24]

Historically, the most common pattern of a direct-attack strategy has been one in which an attacker's forces advance to capture a defender's values (a capital city, an industrial or communications center, or a bridge) or strategic assets (defensible terrain or a fort) and the defender moves to thwart that effort. A battle or series of battles ensue, sometimes marked by lulls lasting entire seasons, until one side admits defeat.

BARBARISM. Barbarism is the systematic violation of the laws of war in pursuit of a military or political objective.[25] Although this definition includes the use of prohibited weapons such as chemical and biological agents, its most important element is depredations against noncombatants (viz., rape, murder, and torture).[26] Unlike other strategies, barbarism has been used to destroy an adversary's will and capacity to fight. When will is the target in a strategic

22. Mearsheimer's definitions of three main-attack strategies—blitzkrieg, attrition, and limited aims—provide a useful starting point for the variations I introduce here. See Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence,* pp. 29–30, 33–43, 53–56.

23. A blitzkrieg features mobile armored formations—tanks supported by motorized infantry, mobile artillery, and tactical air support—concentrating their attack against a narrow portion of a defender's extended position (usually thought of as a line). Once the enemy's line is penetrated, instead of turning immediately to engage flanked forces, armored columns penetrate deep into the defender's rear areas, cutting communications, capturing supplies, and generally making it impossible for now-isolated forward-deployed defenders to coordinate a defense. As a result, "an opponent can be disarmed without numerous battles of annihilation." See ibid., p. 30.

24. Mearsheimer notes that a successful blitzkrieg encirclement often results in the destruction of a surrounded unit's will to resist. See ibid., p. 38. Although in the case of blitzkrieg the impact is restricted to the unit level (tactical), the observation supports the association between indirectness and will proposed here.

25. The laws of war have evolved considerably over time. As used here they include the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, the Genocide Convention of 1948, the Four Geneva Conventions of 1949, and the Two Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 1977. On the laws of war and their historical development, see André Corvisier and Barry Paskins, "Laws of War," in Corvisier and Childs, *A Dictionary of Military History and the Art of War,* pp. 443–453; Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations,* 2d ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1992); and Michael Howard, George J. Andreopoulos, and Mark R. Shulman, eds., *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994). For a concise collection of the documents themselves, see Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff, *Documents on the Laws of War,* 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

26. See, for example, Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars,* p. 151. Chemical and biological weapons have been traditionally included in this category because they are inherently indiscriminate. Deliberate destruction of a defender's natural environment (through deforestation, draining of swamps, etc.) is also a violation of the laws of war for the same reason. See Mark Perry and Ed Miles, "Environ-

bombing campaign, for example, the strong actor seeks to coerce its weaker opponent into changing its behavior by inflicting pain (destroying its values).[27] When will is the target in a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign, the strong actor attempts to deter would-be insurgents through, for instance, a policy of reprisals against noncombatants.[28] Strong actors can also target a weak actor's capacity to sustain an insurgency by, for example, the use of concentration camps.[29] Historically, the most common forms of barbarism include the murder of noncombatants (e.g., prisoners of war or civilians during combat operations); the use of concentration camps;[30] and since 1939, strategic bombing against targets of no military value.[31]

---

mental Warfare," in Roy Gutman and David Rieff, *Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), pp. 132–135.

27. The classic work here is Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), especially chaps. 1 and 4. See also Robert A. Pape, Jr., "Coercive Air Power in the Vietnam War," *International Security,* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1990), pp. 103–146; and Pape, *Bombing to Win.* In theory, it is possible to employ strategic air power to target an adversary's capacity to fight by using air forces to destroy or interdict supplies, demolish key communications points (railroad junctions, bridges, and airfields), or level arms factories. If it were possible to do so without killing noncombatants, this would count as a direct-attack strategy. But in practice—even taking into account advances in precision-guided munitions—strategic air power is too a blunt weapon, and noncombatants are killed disproportionate to the military necessity of destroying the targets. NATO's strategic air campaign in Kosovo in 1999 is a case in point. See, for example, Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *Kosovo Report: Conflict, International Response, Lessons Learned* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 92–94.

28. Such reprisals typically include executing randomly selected civilians in retaliation for the killing of an occupying soldier. See, for example, Robert Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Classic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Persia to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown, 1994), p. 108.

29. Insurgent intelligence and support networks depend on the participation of sympathetic noncombatants, and concentration camps disrupt these networks. See, for example, Donald W. Hamilton, *The Art of Insurgency: American Military Policy and the Failure of Strategy in Southeast Asia* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), p. 59; and Paula M. Krebs, "'The Last of the Gentlemen's Wars': Women in the Boer War Concentration Camp Controversy," *History Workshop Journal,* No. 33 (Spring 1992), pp. 41–42.

30. The British used concentration camps as a COIN strategy during the South African War. Although not intended by the British, as many as 28,000 Boer women and children died in these camps—more than the combined total of combatant casualties from both sides. On the use of concentration camps as a COIN strategy, see John Ellis, *A Short History of Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: St. Martin's, 1976), p. 111. On their use and consequences in the South African War, see Christiaan De Wet, *The Three Years' War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), pp. 192–193; Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York: Random House, 1979), chap. 29 and pp. 607–608; and Krebs, "'The Last of the Gentlemen's Wars.'"

31. Allied bombing of Dresden is a common example. See Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 97–99. On the subject of strategic bombing as coercion against Nazi Germany more generally, see Pape, *Bombing to Win,* pp. 260–262. In terms of Pape's argument, strategic bombing that targets noncombatants would count as barbarism. When air power is used to target enemy forces, it would count as a direct-attack strategy. Attacks on infrastructure and industry are more problematic: Noncombatants are not targets, but those who employ this strategy know beforehand that noncombatants will be killed in such attacks.

DIRECT DEFENSE. Direct defense refers to the use of armed forces to thwart an adversary's attempt to capture or destroy values such as territory, population, and strategic resources. Like direct-attack strategies, these strategies target an opponent's military. The aim is to damage an adversary's capacity to attack by crippling its advancing or proximate armed forces. Examples include limited aims strategies, static defense, forward defense, defense in depth, and mobile defense.[32]

The inclusion here of limited aims strategies may seem counterintuitive. Like preemptive or preventive attack strategies, these strategies begin with an initial offensive—say, attacking concentrations of enemy armed forces across an international border—but their ultimate aims are defensive.[33] Limited aims strategies target an adversary's capacity to attack by destroying vital strategic forces or by seizing key strategic assets (territory, bridges, promontories, etc.). They are most often employed by weak actors that have initiated wars against strong actors.[34] Examples include Japan's air assault on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and Egypt's attack on Israel in 1973.

GUERRILLA WARFARE. Guerrilla warfare strategy (GWS) is the organization of a portion of society for the purpose of imposing costs on an adversary using armed forces trained to avoid direct confrontation.[35] These costs include the loss of soldiers, supplies, infrastructure, peace of mind, and most important, time.[36] Although GWS primarily targets opposing armed forces and their support resources, its goal is to destroy not the capacity but the will of the attacker.[37]

---

32. For full summary descriptions, see Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence,* pp. 48–50.
33. Ibid., pp. 53–56.
34. Ibid., pp. 24–26, 168.
35. A related strategy is terrorism, which commonly has political objectives similar to GWS. The logic of most terrorism mirrors that of coercive strategic bombing. A largely urban phenomenon, terrorism seeks either to inflict pain on noncombatants so they will pressure their government to accede to the terrorists' political demands, or to delegitimize a government as a means to replace or coerce it. This implies that the strategy will be most effective when citizens have a say in their government's policies.
36. On this point especially, see Samuel Huntington's remarks in Stanley Hoffmann, Samuel P. Huntington, Ernest R. May, Richard N. Neustadt, and Thomas C. Schelling, "Vietnam Reappraised," *International Security,* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Summer 1981), p. 7. See also Eliot A. Cohen, "Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars," *International Security,* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Fall 1984), p. 157.
37. For general introductions to GWS, see Laqueur, *Guerrilla;* Ellis, *From the Barrel of a Gun;* Asprey, *War in the Shadows;* and Anthony James Joes, *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical, Biographical, and Bibliographical Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1996). On Chinese and Cuban variations of GWS, see Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare,* trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Praeger, 1961); Edward L. Katzenbach and Gene Z. Hanrahan, "The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung," *Political Science Quarterly,* Vol. 70, No. 3 (September 1955), pp. 321–340; Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Monthly Review, 1961); and Regis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?* (New York: Penguin, 1968).

GWS requires two elements: (1) physical sanctuary (e.g., swamps, mountains, thick forest, or jungle) or political sanctuary (e.g., weakly defended border areas or border areas controlled by sympathetic states), and (2) a supportive population (to supply fighters with intelligence and logistical support, as well as replacements). The method of GWS is well summarized by perhaps its most famous practitioner, Mao Tse-tung: "In guerrilla warfare, select the tactic of seeming to come from the east and attacking from the west; avoid the solid, attack the hollow; attack; withdraw; deliver a lightning blow, seek a lightning decision. When guerrillas engage a stronger enemy, they withdraw when he advances; harass him when he stops; strike him when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws. In guerrilla strategy, the enemy's rear, flanks, and other vulnerable spots are his vital points, and there he must be harassed, attacked, dispersed, exhausted, and annihilated."[38]

GWS is not a strategy for obtaining a quick, decisive defeat of invading or occupying forces.[39] Moreover, because guerrillas cannot hold or defend particular areas, they do not provide security for their families while on operations or when demobilized to await new missions. GWS is therefore a strategy that requires placing key values (e.g., farms, family, religious or cultural sites, and towns) directly in the hands of the adversary. Logically then, important costs of adopting a GWS depend on both the purpose and the restraint of the adversary.[40] When invading or occupying forces do not exercise restraint in the use of force, or when their purpose is the destruction of a weak actor's people, GWS can become a prohibitively expensive defensive strategy.

The logic of strategic interaction

Every strategy has an ideal counterstrategy. Actors able to predict their adversary's strategy can therefore dramatically improve their chances of victory by choosing and implementing that counterstrategy. Mao, for example, argued that "defeat is the invariable outcome where native forces fight with inferior weapons against modernized forces *on the latter's terms.*"[41] Mao's maxim suggests that when the weak fight the strong, the interaction of some strategies will favor the weak, while others will favor the strong.

---

38. Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare,* p. 46.
39. See, for example, Hamilton, *The Art of Insurgency,* p. 27.
40. In March 1900 the British captured the first Boer capital, Bloemfontein. The surviving Boer commanders gathered to decide whether to surrender or keep fighting. The commanders were closely divided, but tipping the balance in favor of continued—guerrilla—resistance was faith in British civility. The Boer ultimately found their faith unjustified. See De Wet, *The Three Years' War,* pp. 192–193.
41. Quoted in Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," p. 176 (emphasis in original).

Building on Mao's insight, I argue that the universe of potential strategies and counterstrategies can be reduced to two distinct ideal-type strategic approaches: direct and indirect.[42] Direct approaches target an adversary's armed forces in order to destroy that adversary's capacity to fight. Indirect approaches seek to destroy an adversary's will to fight: Toward this end, a GWS targets enemy sodiers, and barbarism targets enemy noncombatants.[43] Same-approach interactions (direct-direct or indirect-indirect) imply defeat for weak actors because there is nothing to mediate or deflect a strong actor's power advantage. These interactions will therefore be resolved quickly. By contrast, opposite-approach interactions (direct-indirect or indirect-direct) imply victory for weak actors because the strong actor's power advantage is deflected or dodged.[44] These therefore tend to be protracted, with time favoring the weak.[45]

In asymmetric conflicts when strategic interaction causes an unexpected delay between the commitment of armed forces and the attainment of military or political objectives, strong actors tend to lose for two reasons. First, although all combatants tend to have inflated expectations of victory,[46] strong actors in asymmetric conflicts are particularly susceptible to this problem.[47] If power implies victory, then an overwhelming power advantage implies an overwhelming—and rapid—victory. As war against a Lilliputian opponent drags on, however, dramatic overestimates of success force political and military elites in the strong state to escalate the use of force to meet expectations (thus increasing the costs of a conflict) or risk looking increasingly incompetent. Either way, domestic pressure to end the conflict is likely to result. And as Mack highlights in his discussion of political vulnerability, the longer a war drags on, the greater the chances are that the strong actor will simply abandon the war effort, regardless of the military state of affairs on the ground. Strong actors also lose asymmetric wars when, in attempting to avoid increasing costs—such as declaring war, mobilizing reserves, raising taxes, or sustaining additional

42. This reduction of strategies to two mutually exclusive types is well established in the strategic studies literature. See, for example, André Corvisier and John Childs, "Indirect Warfare," in Corvisier and Childs, *A Dictionary of Military History and the Art of War,* p. 378; and Liddell Hart, *Strategy,* pp. 197, 361–364.
43. For a similar definition, see Pape, "Coercive Air Power in the Vietnam War," pp. 106–107.
44. In GWS, an attacker's armed forces are physically avoided or engaged only on favorable terms. In a blockade or strategic bombing campaign against a direct defense in a limited war, the strong actor's destructive power is deflected, because such attacks invariably place the noncombatant population between attackers and political elites.
45. On the importance of conflict duration as a cost of conflict, see Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence,* p. 24; and Katzenbach and Hanrahan, "The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung," pp. 324–326.
46. See Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War,* 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988), p. 53.
47. See, for example, Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," pp. 181–182.

casualties—they yield to the temptation to employ barbarism. Barbarism conserves friendly forces, but even when militarily effective it is risky:[48] Barbarism carries the possibility of domestic political discovery (and opposition) as well as external intervention.

STRATEGIC INTERACTION: EXPLAINING THE TREND. My explanation for the trend toward increasing strong-actor failure is suggested both by the timing of the biggest shift in outcomes favoring weak actors (1950–98) and by the logic of Kenneth Waltz's argument that actors in a competitive international system "socialize" to similar policies and strategies. As Waltz argues, "The fate of each state depends on its responses to what other states do. The possibility that conflict will be conducted by force leads to competition in the arts and the instruments of force. Competition produces a tendency toward the sameness of the competitors."[49]

This said, what is the appropriate spatial context for socialization? I argue that socialization works regionally, and that after World War II two different patterns of socialization emerged in two different regions of the world. In the blitzkrieg pattern, success was measured by the capacity to produce and deploy large mechanized and combined-armed forces designed to destroy an adversary's armed forces and capture its values without costly battles of annihilation. This model was imitated by the United States, its European allies, the Soviet Union, and to some extent Japan. In the guerrilla warfare pattern, success was measured by the ability to prosecute a protracted conflict against a technologically superior foe. Mao's long fight for, and eventual conquest of, China was a model copied by Algerian rebels, the Vietminh, the Hukbalahap, Cuban insurgents, Malayan communists, and to a large extent the Mujahideen.[50] The blitzkrieg model emphasizes direct strategic approaches; the guerrilla warfare model, indirect strategic approaches. When the two interact systematically, strong actors should lose more often.

These patterns of socialization suggest that actors on the threshold of armed conflict are not entirely free to choose an ideal strategy for two reasons. First, forces, equipment, and training—all closely integrated—are not fungible. Moreover, the development and prosecution of an actor's ideal strategy may

48. Mack correctly emphasizes that barbarism is judged in proportion to the relative power of the actors: Weak actors will be forgiven abuses for which strong actors will be hanged. See ibid., pp. 186–187.
49. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 127.
50. On Mao's revolutionary guerrilla warfare as template, see Hamilton, *The Art of Insurgency*, p. 18; and Katzenbach and Hanrahan, "The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung," p. 322.

be blocked by contrary organizational interests or traditions.[51] Second, actors prioritize threats: If the United States and Soviet Union, for example, identified each other as the primary threat, and both calculated that the most likely area of direct confrontation would be the heart of Europe, then adopting war-winning strategies, forces, equipment, and doctrines favorable to winning that sort of war would be a sound strategy.

HYPOTHESES: STRATEGIC INTERACTION AND CONFLICT OUTCOMES

This section explores the logic of four distinct strategic interactions and explains how hypotheses derived from each can be reduced to a single hypothesis. The expected relationship of strategic approach interactions to outcomes in asymmetric conflicts is summarized in Figure 3.

DIRECT ATTACK VERSUS DIRECT DEFENSE. In this interaction both actors make similar assumptions about the priority of values over which they will fight. Both can therefore be expected to agree about the implications of a catastrophic loss in battle, the rules of war, or the capture of a capital city. Because in this interaction nothing mediates between relative material power and outcomes, strong actors should win quickly and decisively.

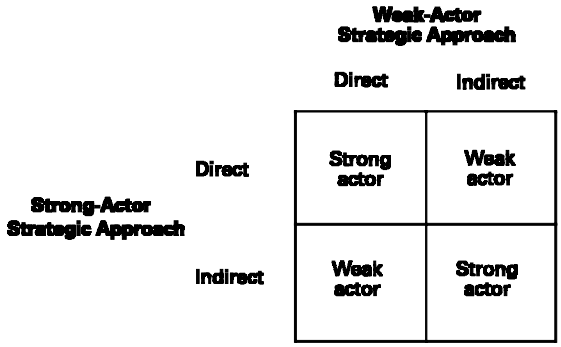
Hypothesis 1: When strong actors attack using a direct strategy and weak actors defend using a direct strategy, all other things being equal, strong actors should win quickly and decisively.

DIRECT ATTACK VERSUS INDIRECT DEFENSE. Unlike direct strategies, which involve the use of forces trained and equipped to fight as organized units against other similarly trained and equipped forces, indirect defense strategies typically rely on irregular armed forces (i.e., forces difficult to distinguish from noncombatants when not in actual combat). As a result, an attacker's forces tend to kill or injure noncombatants during operations, which tends to stimulate weak-actor resistance. Most important, because indirect defense strategies sacrifice values for time,[52] they necessarily take longer to resolve so long as weak actors continue to have access to sanctuary and social support.[53] In asymmetric conflicts, delay favors the weak.

---

51. See, for example, Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1997); Cohen, "Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars," pp. 152–154; and Asprey, *War in the Shadows,* p. 836.
52. See Katzenbach and Hanrahan, "The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung," pp. 325–326.
53. Although a GWS requires sanctuary and social support, mere access to them in no way mandates its adoption. French forces, for example, had access to both as they faced defeat in the

Figure 3. Expected Effects of Strategic Interaction on Conflict Outcomes (expected winners in cells).



Hypothesis 2: When strong actors attack with a direct strategy and weak actors defend using an indirect strategy, all other things being equal, weak actors should win.

INDIRECT ATTACK VERSUS DIRECT DEFENSE. Because the overwhelming force available to the strong actor implies success against a weak adversary that attempts a direct defense, an attacker's use of an indirect strategy in this context targets the defender's will to resist. Prior to the advent of strategic air power and long-range artillery (e.g., the V-1 and V-2 rockets in World War II), blockades and sieges were the only means of coercing adversaries in this way. Today strategic bombing campaigns[54] are the most common form of indirect attack against direct defense.

As coercive strategies intended to destroy an adversary's will to resist, strategic bombing campaigns tend to backfire, stimulating precisely the sort of resolve they aim to break: German bombing of London did not cow the British into surrender, as Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring expected. Instead it stiffened British resolve. Strong actors will lose these interactions because they are time-consuming and tend toward barbarism.[55]

Franco-Prussian War in 1870. France actively considered adopting a GWS after its disastrous defeat at Sedan. Yet threatened with the loss of Paris, France surrendered instead. See Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (New York: Methuen, 1961), pp. 249–250.

54. Pape, *Bombing to Win*, chap. 6, has shown that strategic bombing or "punishment" strategies rarely work (and that they cannot work against indirect defense strategies, such as GWS). See also Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989). If Pape is right and tactical air power is highly effective as a means to coerce an adversary, then tactical air support that accepts collateral damage should become increasingly common; and "human shield" defense of, say, armored or transport columns would become an increasingly common countermeasure.

55. Strategic bombing campaigns usually start out with the intent to spare noncombatants—often to the point of putting pilots and their crews at considerable risk (e.g., by flying lower or slower)—

Hypothesis 3: When strong actors attack using an indirect strategy and weak actors defend using a direct strategy, all other things being equal, strong actors should lose.

INDIRECT ATTACK VERSUS INDIRECT DEFENSE. Indirect defense strategies presuppose a certain level of moral restraint on the part of attackers. When strong actors employ a strategy that ignores such restraint, weak actors are unlikely to win—both because there would be no one left to win for, and because GWS depends directly on a network of social support for intelligence, logistical assistance, and replacements.[56] Barbarism works as a COIN strategy because by attacking either or both of the essential elements of a GWS—sanctuary and social assistance—it destroys an adversary's capacity to fight. For example, in the Murid War—the Russian empire's struggle to conquer the Muslim tribes of the Caucasus Mountains from 1830 to 1859—the Russians found that they could not make any headway against the mountain Murids because of severe attrition and supply problems associated with passing through the heavy beech forests of Chechnya. The Murids raided Russian forts and settlements from mountain fortresses that were virtually impregnable to attack except by heavy artillery. Masters of marksmanship and hit-and-run tactics, the Chechens would strike heavily armed Russian columns and then vanish into the forest before the Russians could mount a counterattack. The Russians ultimately fought back by felling thousands of trees, virtually deforesting Chechnya. By 1859 they were finally able to use their heavy artillery to blast Murid mountain strongholds into rubble, and resistance soon collapsed.

Hypothesis 4: When strong actors employ barbarism to attack weak actors defending with a GWS, all other things being equal, strong actors should win.

Each of these hypotheses describes an interaction of either same-approach or opposite-approach strategic interaction. It follows that all four may be tested as a single hypothesis.

---

but in most cases, these campaigns escalate until either noncombatant casualties are simply accepted (as was the case with U.S. bombing of North Vietnam during the Rolling Thunder campaign), or noncombatants become accepted targets (as in the case of the fire bombings of Dresden and Tokyo and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). A strict interpretation of the laws of war may make a strategic air campaign that accepts "collateral damage" (viz., death or injury to noncombatants) a war crime. The issue is tricky: The laws of war permit collateral damage so long as that damage is proportional to the military value of the target itself. But if strategic air power has no military utility, then collateral damage from strategic bombing would constitute a war crime.

56. Mao Tse-tung once analogized the relationship between insurgents and citizens in a people's war by likening the fighters to fish and the people to the sea. Effective counterinsurgency would therefore require either altering the terrain (making the sea transparent) or killing, expelling, or

Hypothesis 5: Strong actors are more likely to win same-approach interactions and lose opposite-approach interactions.

A First Test: Strategic Interaction and Asymmetric War Outcomes, 1800–1998

The aim of this section is to determine whether a statistically significant correlation exists between strategic interaction and asymmetric conflict outcomes. It begins with a discussion of how cases were coded and then analyzes three key relationships: (1) strategic interaction and conflict outcomes, (2) strategic interaction and conflict duration, and (3) strategic interaction and the trend toward increasing strong-actor failure over time.

CODING AND CASES

The basic method of coding cases was to examine the history of each war in the *Correlates of War* data set. 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. If the strong actor used armed forces to attempt to destroy a weak actor's forces or capture values, it was coded as a direct attack. If the weak actor used armed forces to attempt to thwart these attacks, it was coded as a direct defense. A coding of barbarism was reserved for strong actors that systematically targeted noncombatants, employed illicit weapons, or accepted collateral damage in a strategic bombing campaign after bomb damage assessments cast considerable doubt on the efficacy of the campaign as a whole. A weak actor was coded as using a GWS if it sought to impose costs on the strong actor with armed force while avoiding pitched battles. Each conflict dyad was coded with one of four strategic interactions (direct-direct, direct-indirect, indirect-direct, or indirect-indirect),[57] be-

---

imprisoning the people (drying up the sea). Both would count as barbarism. See Mao Tse-tung, "Primer on Guerrilla Warfare," in Donald Robinson, ed., *The Dirty Wars: Guerrilla Actions and Other Forms of Unconventional Warfare* (New York: Delacorte, 1968), p. 284.

57. Most asymmetric wars contain a single strategic interaction from start to finish, but a few—such as the South African War and the U.S. intervention in Vietnam—contain multiple-sequential or multiple-simultaneous interactions, respectively. In multiple-sequential interaction conflicts, strategies change, but in temporal sequence: One side's strategic shift is quickly followed by another's. Multiple-simultaneous interaction conflicts are those in which a single actor, or an actor and its allies, pursue different strategies against the same adversary within a single theater of operations. The empirical distribution of conflict types is as follows: single, 134 (77.5 percent), multiple- sequential, 29 (16.8 percent), and multiple-simultaneous, 10 (5.8 percent). In this analysis, conflict outcomes are explained by strategic interaction outcomes.

fore being reduced to one of two interaction types (same approach or opposite approach).[58]

The key variable of analysis is strategic interaction (STRATINT) as compared to conflict outcome (OUTCOME). If strategic interaction causes change in conflict outcome, then a shift in the value of strategic interaction across the case universe should be matched by a corresponding shift in outcome. The STRATINT variable was coded 0 if the strategic interaction was same approach (direct-direct or indirect-indirect), and 1 if it was opposite approach (direct-indirect or indirect-direct). The OUTCOME variable was coded 0 if the strong actor lost, and 1 if it won.[59]

STRATEGIC INTERACTION AND CONFLICT OUTCOMES

Running correlations established both that strategic interaction and asymmetric conflict outcomes are associated, and that the relationship is statistically significant (see Figure 4).[60] The results thus support hypothesis 5.[61] Strong actors won 76 percent of all same-approach interactions, and weak actors won 63 percent of all opposite-approach interactions.

STRATEGIC INTERACTION AND CONFLICT DURATION

The key causal mechanism of the strategic interaction thesis is time: Same-approach interactions should be over quickly, whereas opposite-approach interactions should be protracted (with weak actors tending to win drawn-out wars). An analysis of the average duration of same-approach and opposite-

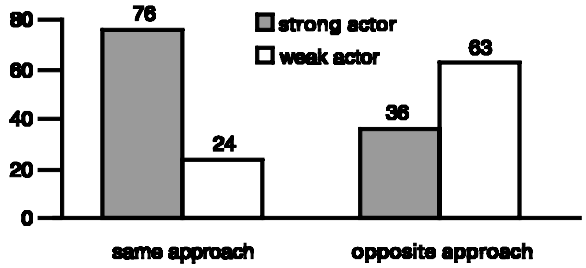
58. The relatively few wars with multiple interactions were reduced to single interactions. In multiple-sequential conflicts, the final interaction was used to represent the overall conflict: The South African War was coded same approach because it ended with an indirect-indirect interaction. In multiple-simultaneous conflicts, interactions were averaged: U.S. intervention in Vietnam was coded opposite approach because although some interactions were same approach, on balance, the contest was decided by a direct-indirect interaction. The chief consequence of these reductions is a tougher test for the strategic interaction thesis, because collapsing interactions increases the impact of relative material power on outcomes. Because strong actors have a greater material capacity to adapt to failure than do weak actors, collapsing interactions hides strong-actor rather than weak-actor failures.

59. Stalemates and ongoing conflicts were coded losses for the strong actor.

60. Pearson chi-squared (1), 14.56, $p < .001$.

61. An analysis of the relationship between strategic interaction and interaction outcomes (as opposed to war outcomes) produces an even more striking finding: Weak actors win 23.1 percent of same-approach and 78.4 percent of opposite-approach interactions. This relationship is statistically significant: Pearson chi-squared (1), 40.95, $p < .001$. An analysis of the impact of external noncombat support for weak actors did not refute the strategic interaction thesis: Even when weak actors received no support, they were still three times more likely to win opposite-approach interactions than they were same-approach interactions: Pearson chi-squared (1), 11.38, $p < .001$.

Figure 4. Strategic Interaction and Asymmetric Conflict Outcomes, 1800–1998.



approach interactions supports this claim: Same-approach interactions lasted 2.69 years on average (2.98 years was the overall mean); opposite-approach interactions lasted an average of 4.86 years.

STRATEGIC INTERACTION AND LONG-TERM TRENDS

Both opposite-approach interactions and strong-actor failures have increased over time: From 1800 to 1849, 5.9 percent of interactions in thirty-four asymmetric conflicts were opposite approach. From 1850 to 1899, 10.1 percent of interactions in sixty-nine asymmetric conflicts were opposite approach. From 1900 to 1949, 16.1 percent of thirty-one asymmetric conflicts were opposite, and from 1950 to 1998, 22.2 percent of thirty-six asymmetric conflicts were opposite.

In sum, the data analysis supports three key hypotheses relating strategic interaction to asymmetric conflict outcomes. First, strong actors are more likely to lose opposite-approach strategic interactions. Second, opposite-approach interaction conflicts take longer to resolve than do same-approach interactions. Third, the frequency of opposite-approach interactions has increased in proportion to strong-actor failure over time.

The analysis is limited, however, because some data are missing: Many civil and colonial wars recorded neither the quantity of forces committed nor the strategies employed. Although these defects are balanced by statistical controls, even a perfect data set would support only a correlation between variables, not causation. Thus, although the data analysis might have refuted the strategic interaction thesis, only in combination with a careful comparison of historical cases could the thesis be confirmed.[62]

62. See Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "Arts of Darkness: Guerrilla Warfare and Barbarism in Asymmetric Conflicts," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1998.

U.S. Intervention in the Vietnam War

In this section I present a synoptic case study of U.S. intervention in Vietnam (March 1965 to January 1973) as a preliminary test of the causal logic of the interest asymmetry and strategic interaction theses. The Vietnam War represents the strongest case study for Mack's interest asymmetry thesis. If strategic interaction can explain the war's outcome better than can interest asymmetry, then all other things being equal, it should be considered a better theory.

BACKGROUND

U.S. military intervention in Vietnam began soon after the defeat of France at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The commitment of U.S. combat troops, however, did not occur until eleven years later. In 1965 the U.S. population was about 194 million, while North Vietnam's stood at approximately 19 million.[63] U.S. and North Vietnamese armed forces totaled about 2.5 million and 256,000, respectively. Adding in allies that contributed combat troops (negligible), multiplying population and armed forces, and dividing the strong actor's total by two results in a relative force ratio of about 53:1. Even allowing for the fact that the United States did not actually devote half of its armed forces and half of its population to the conflict,[64] there is no question that (1) this was an asymmetric conflict, and (2) the United States and its allies were the strong actor.[65]

U.S. MILITARY INTERVENTION, 1965–73

U.S. military intervention involved four distinct strategic interactions: (1) barbarism (Rolling Thunder) against a direct defense, (2) a direct attack against a direct defense (the main-force units war), (3) direct attacks against a GWS (the guerrilla war in the South I), and (4) barbarism against GWS (the guerrilla war in the South II).

INTERACTION 1: ROLLING THUNDER, 1965–68. The first strategic interaction of the war began in March 1965 with a U.S. strategic bombing campaign, later

63. These figures are taken from Singer and Small, *Correlates of War,* war number 163.
64. The logic of the relative power estimate does not require calculating how much of a given actor's power resources were applied to the fight. What matters is the resources that an actor could have applied to win the war. On this point, see Schelling, *Arms and Influence,* pp. 142–143, 172.
65. Even if we assume, for the sake of simplicity, that the contest was between only the United States and North Vietnam, the ratio shifts to 49:1 in favor of the United States.

named Rolling Thunder.[66] Its main goal was to destroy the willingness of North Vietnam to support the guerrilla war campaign in the South, and as its name implied, the campaign was expected to take time: "Instead of a coordinated air campaign . . . which would destroy the enemy's ability to wage war and break their will to resist, air operations over the North were designed as a diplomatic 'slow squeeze' signaling device. As Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara said on February 3, 1966, 'U.S. objectives are not to destroy or to overthrow the Communist government of North Vietnam. They are limited to the destruction of the insurrection and aggression directed by North Vietnam against the political institutions of South Vietnam.'"[67]

The United States wanted to inflict enough pain on North Vietnam to compel it to stop supporting the GWS in the South. North Vietnam's defense against Rolling Thunder was direct: It sought to thwart U.S. military attacks on its infrastructure and forces by means of fighter aircraft and an increasingly dense radar and surface-to-air missile defense network.

U.S. Air Force generals and civilian leaders shared a theory about the general effectiveness of strategic bombing. Strategic bombing should have both hampered North Vietnam's war effort and coerced its leadership into giving up. When neither expectation was realized, military and civilian elites faced a stark choice: either reject the theory or blame failure on some flaw in implementation. The Air Force chose to emphasize flaws, while the Johnson administration was increasingly split: Some agreed that the United States was hitting the wrong targets—or not hitting the right targets hard enough. Others, including eventually Defense Secretary McNamara, concluded that against North Vietnam strategic bombing could not work. McNamara's reports indicated that the military value of Rolling Thunder's destroyed targets was zero.[68]

---

66. On the origins of the Rolling Thunder campaign and its purpose, see Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* p. 397. On collateral damage to noncombatants in Rolling Thunder, see ibid., p. 458. On relative U.S. moral restraint in Rolling Thunder, see ibid., p. 653. For a dedicated analysis of Rolling Thunder and its failure, see James Clay Thompson, *Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); for a theoretical treatment that anticipates the strategic interaction thesis, see Pape, *Bombing to Win,* especially chap. 6. Pape argues that when air power is used to target an adversary's armed forces, it generally wins, and when used to target an adversary's values (including infrastructure), it generally fails. In other words, punishment and denial represent indirect and direct strategic approaches, respectively; Pape's argument, as Mearsheimer's before it and mine after, therefore constitutes an argument for the independent causal impact of strategy on conflict outcomes.

67. Quoted in Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 96.

68. Its political utility was less than zero: It increased international and domestic opposition to the U.S. war effort, and although the North Vietnamese feared and hated the bombing, they never considered altering their war aims as a result of the pain it inflicted.

Bombing that accepted collateral damage subsequent to this recognition was therefore a war crime: barbarism.

Rolling Thunder continued until a week before the November 1968 U.S. presidential election. It was an interaction in which a strong actor (the United States) employed an indirect strategy against a weak actor (North Vietnam) using a direct strategy, and lost.[69]

INTERACTION 2: THE MAIN-FORCE UNITS WAR, 1965–69. This phase of the war featured a series of pitched battles between North Vietnamese regular units and those of the United States and the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). In a sequence of engagements that lasted throughout the war, U.S. forces proved overwhelmingly successful at destroying North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong (VC) main-force units.

Examples of this interaction, in which a strong-actor direct-indirect opposed a weak-actor direct strategy, include Operation Starlite (August 1965), the Battle of Ia Drang (October–November 1965), Masher/White Wing (January–March 1966), and Phase II of Operation Attleboro (October–November 1966).[70] As the ground war continued into 1968, the frequency of these interactions dwindled, and U.S. forces in the South focused increasingly on the problem of counterinsurgency.

Part of the decreasing frequency of this direct-direct interaction reflected actor learning: North Vietnam's leadership analyzed main-force unit engagements carefully and concluded that U.S. forces were so adept at combining maneuver and firepower that, unless the encounter took place between dramatically mismatched forces (as at LZ Albany in November 1965), NVA and VC main-force units would invariably be destroyed. In the context of Mao's warning above, native forces were fighting with inferior weapons on U.S. terms; and as predicted, they lost.

As the loser in this interaction, the North began to innovate tactically and strategically. In tactical terms, NVA units attempted to "cling to the belt" of U.S. and ARVN forces,[71] getting so close so quickly that allied forces could not

---

69. No one involved in the campaign on the U.S. side considers Rolling Thunder a success, although it is fair to say that the reasons proposed to explain the campaign's failure have been numerous and controversial. From the military perspective, the consensus is that the campaign failed because it misapplied military means to achieve a political end. For a more thorough discussion and analysis of Rolling Thunder's target and impact, see, for example, Thompson, *Rolling Thunder,* Herring, *America's Longest War,* p. 147; Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power;* and Pape, "Coercive Air Power in the Vietnam War."

70. These examples are drawn from Summers, *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War;* and Marc Leepson, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary of the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

71. See Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* p. 463.

benefit from close air or artillery support. In strategic terms, the North shifted more of its resources into the guerrilla campaign in the South.

INTERACTION 3: THE GUERRILLA WAR IN THE SOUTH I, 1965–73. Guerrillas in the South waged their campaign with considerable skill and were countered with a bewildering mix of professionalism, passion, sadism, and incompetence. In this dimension of the conflict more than any other, U.S. efforts were heavily filtered through, and constrained by, the United States' South Vietnamese allies.[72]

In U.S. Army areas of responsibility, the first attempts to defeat the VC insurgency involved search and destroy missions. In this type of mission, regular army units, acting on intelligence that had located enemy unit concetrations, would seek to make contact with these concentrations and destroy them. Large-scale examples of this type of interaction include Phase I of Operation Attleboro (September–October 1965), Operation Cedar Falls (January 1967), and Operation Junction City (February–May 1967); but these interactions repeated themselves on a smaller scale throughout the war. Forces were killed on both sides, but the strategic balance slowly shifted to favor the VC, largely because U.S. forces relied heavily on indirect firepower—tactical air and artillery support—a consequence of which was considerable death or injury to noncombatants.[73]

Not all U.S. COIN efforts failed outright or succeeded through barbarism. U.S. Marine Corps forces in the mountainous northernmost area of South Vietnam, for example, pursued a COIN strategy combining local and highly motivated (but poorly trained and equipped) villagers with direct support from U.S. Marine combat platoons. These combined action platoons (or CAPs) operated on an "inkblot" principle: Secure a village or hamlet, then patrol out in widening circles until intersecting with another CAP's secured area. The strategy had two major disadvantages, however. First, although it protected South Vietnamese citizens from immediate danger of terror attacks by VC guerrillas, it could achieve success only in the long term—and time favored the VC.[74] Second, although militarily effective, CAP success only highlighted the inability of the South Vietnamese government to protect its own citizens.

Ultimately, the United States lost this interaction. Its combat forces had been trained and equipped to fight a uniformed regular adversary using massive

72. The record of performance by ARVN units is mixed. Some units and their commanders are extolled for their bravery, skill, and loyalty, while many are remembered only for their cowardice, incompetence, and venality. See, for example, Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* p. 441; and Summers, *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War,* p. 80.
73. See Asprey, *War in the Shadows,* p. 881.
74. See ibid., p. 848.

firepower, not an invisible enemy that refused to meet it in battle.[75] The indiscriminate impact of the U.S. Army's heavy reliance on artillery and air support progressively alienated potential allies among South Vietnam's people. As losers, however, U.S. forces were not slow to innovate a strategic response.

INTERACTION 4: THE GUERRILLA WAR IN THE SOUTH II, 1965–73. U.S. strategic innovations that aimed at seriously undermining the VC guerrilla campaign in the South took two forms. The first was the Strategic Hamlets program, and the second was the Phoenix program.[76]

The U.S. Strategic Hamlets program was modeled after a French program in which South Vietnamese villagers were forced from their homes and relocated to fortified hamlets.[77] Where implemented effectively, the U.S. program had the military benefit of severely damaging VC intelligence and supply networks, but it also extracted a significant political cost: As nightly news broadcasts flashed images of more and more wailing peasants being forced to leave their villages, U.S. public opinion began to turn against the war. The program, however, was rarely implemented effectively. In most cases, corrupt officials failed to deliver weapons and embezzled funds and supplies intended to turn the hamlets into functioning communities.[78] As a result, the program alienated the people whose good will the United States and South Vietnam needed to win the war: Forced to leave their homes and then abandoned, many South Vietnamese turned against their government and became active supporters of the VC. By decreasing the program's COIN benefits and increasing its political costs, the South Vietnamese government's corruption and incompetence eventually rendered the Strategic Hamlets program a disaster.

The second U.S. innovation was the Phoenix program, whose aims and legitimacy continue to provoke sharp debate.[79] The overall military view is that Phoenix was essentially a legitimate military operation. It relied on special intelligence to target and destroy VC leadership, and it proved to be the single most successful strategic initiative pursued by U.S. forces during the war.[80]

---

75. This is the central thesis in Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam,* p. 4.
76. "Phoenix" was the code name for a U.S. assassination program that targeted VC leadership.
77. On the Strategic Hamlets program in Vietnam, its logic, and its successes and failures, see Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* pp. 255–257; and Herring, *America's Longest War,* pp. 85–86, 88–90.
78. Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* p. 257.
79. Asprey, *War in the Shadows,* pp. 910–911.
80. There is little question that Phoenix effectively disrupted the capacity of the VC to continue their GWS in the South. Even the North Vietnamese admit this: "Nguyen Co Thach, Vietnam's foreign minister from 1975, admitted that the Phoenix effort 'wiped out many of our bases' in South Vietnam, compelling numbers of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops to retreat to sanctuaries in Cambodia." See Summers, *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War,* p. 148. See also Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* p. 534; and Herring, *America's Longest War,* p. 232.

To most observers, participants, and historians, however, the sustained effort to kill noncombatants raised troubling questions about the program's legitimacy as an extension of U.S. policy, or as a COIN strategy, regardless of its effectiveness.

Overall, the United States won this interaction. The Strategic Hamlets program was never implemented properly, so its contribution to U.S. success in this interaction was negative. By contrast, the Phoenix program, which eviscerated the VC command infrastructure in the South, may have even provoked the North into its premature and disastrous direct confrontation with U.S. regular forces during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Because both strategies systematically and deliberately targeted noncombatants, both must be counted as barbarism—albeit barbarism at the mildest end of the violations spectrum.

POLITICS

Two political aspects of the war deserve special attention. First, why did the United States think it necessary to send combat troops into South Vietnam? Was Vietnam a vital or peripheral U.S. interest? Second, why did the United States withdraw? Was it fought to a stalemate on the battlefield or forced to abandon the war by U.S. domestic opposition?

The United States never entirely decided whether Vietnam was a vital or peripheral interest. If there is a consensus view among historians, it is that the United States got into Vietnam incrementally, confident that after just one more escalation U.S. forces could "stabilize" South Vietnam and exit. Eventually the fate of South Vietnam became inextricably linked with perceptions of the United States' own credibility, and in that sense constituted a vital interest.

The United States withdrew from Vietnam when and how it did because U.S. public opinion had shifted against the war. The United States did not fight as effectively as it could have. But even given the limitations of placing a force trained and equipped to fight and win a land battle in Europe in the mountains, jungles, and marshy river deltas of Indochina, the United States proved remarkably successful at innovating tactical and strategic responses to North Vietnam's strategic initiatives. As a result, by 1969 U.S. forces had achieved the military defeat of the North. Nevertheless, the war dragged on for another four years.

The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 was a consequence of two unrelated problems. First, successive U.S. administrations incorrectly assumed that the defeat of North Vietnam's military forces would lead the North to accede to U.S. demands. George Herring characterizes this problem well: "Nixon's secret diplomacy and implied military threats failed to wrench any concessions

from Hanoi. . . . Still hurting from those losses suffered in the Tet Offensive but by no means ready to quit the fight, Hanoi in 1969 shifted to a defensive, protracted war strategy, sharply curtailing the level of military activity in the south and withdrawing some of its troops back across the demilitarized zone. Certain that American public opinion would eventually force Nixon to withdraw from Vietnam, the North Vietnamese were prepared to wait him out, no matter what additional suffering it might entail."[81]

Second, the military defeat of North Vietnam and the VC insurgency in the South took too long to accomplish.[82] The American public had been led to believe that victory would come quickly—not only because the United States fielded the most powerful and technologically advanced armed force on earth, but because as in past wars, Americans believed its cause to be just. Political and military elites in the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations did little to temper this expectation, and in most cases encouraged it.[83]

SUMMARY

This synoptic presentation describes the Vietnam War in terms of four roughly simultaneous strategic interactions.[84] These interactions and their contributions to the outcome of the war are summarized in Table 1.

In Vietnam, the weak actor had two entirely distinct militaries ready to oppose U.S. forces: one trained and equipped to fight an indirect war, the other trained and equipped to fight a direct war. Thus the North could be far more nimble than the United States in shifting its strategic approach. As Andrew Krepinevich, Donald Hamilton, and others have argued, with the possible exception of the U.S. Marine Corps—which had considerable operational experience with COIN operations—the U.S. military could never reconcile itself to

81. Herring, *America's Longest War,* p. 226.
82. On this point, see Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* pp. 464, 480; and Herring, *America's Longest War,* p. 200.
83. This encouragement culminated in the infamous prediction by U.S. Comdr. William Westmoreland—just prior to Tet—that "the enemy's hopes are bankrupt." See Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* p. 539.
84. Lewis Sorley argues that the war had yet another crucial phase after Tet, in which U.S. forces shifted strategies under their new commander, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams. In terms of the strategic interaction thesis, this would count as "Phase 5: Guerrilla War III/indirect-indirect/U.S. wins: abandons Vietnam/war ends." The difficulty with Sorley's argument is in measuring the effectiveness of Abrams's talented leadership in the context of a VC recently devastated by Phoenix and Tet, and a similarly routed NVA. If, as many assert, the North had retreated to lick its wounds after Tet, then U.S. military effectiveness would appear high regardless of its strategy. For this reason, and because its inclusion would add little in the way of a test of competing explanations, I do not include the interaction in this analysis. See Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

Table 1. Summary of Strategic Interactions and Effects in U.S. Intervention in Vietnam, 1965–73.

	Strategic Interaction	Innovation Effect	Duration Effect
Rolling Thunder	indirect-direct	United States loses; abandons strategy	lengthens war
Main-Force Units War	direct-direct	North loses; withdraws, then escalates (Tet)	shortens war
Guerrilla War I	direct-indirect	United States loses; switches to barbarism (Phoenix)	lengthens war
Guerrilla War II	indirect-indirect	North loses; escalates, then withdraws	shortens war

the demands of a COIN war.[85] These demands do not imply the necessity of creating a force capable of barbarism: As the CAPs demonstrated, it was possible to fight a GWS in the South within the framework of the laws of war. What it was manifestly not possible to do was defeat a people in arms quickly.

Thus the CAP example only underscores the importance of the key causal mechanism of the strategic interaction thesis: When the power relationship implies a speedy victory, and the interaction implies a delay, the way is clear for the operation of what Mack calls political vulnerability. That is, even an ideal COIN strategy—one that destroys enemy forces without destroying enemy values—takes time. If such strategies are to become a model for future COIN operations, this implies a counterintuitive policy: Strong-actor political and military elites must prepare their publics for long-delayed victories against even very weak adversaries when those adversaries employ indirect defense strategies.

Explaining Vietnam: Interest Asymmetry and Strategic Interaction

Strategic interaction provides a powerful way to explain asymmetric conflict outcomes—not only individual wars but the observed trend toward increasing strong-actor failures over time. But the interest asymmetry thesis has the same goal, and it too appears to explain U.S. failure in the Vietnam War. Although the United States ultimately quit Vietnam because of domestic political pressure, as Mack's thesis suggests, the strategic interaction thesis offers two important qualifications of his explanation of the war's outcome.

85. See Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam;* and Hamilton, *The Art of Insurgency,* p. 155.

First, Mack argues that theoretically, at least, actor resolve can be derived from relative power: That is, relative power and political vulnerability vary directly. In Vietnam, however, U.S. resolve had nothing to do with relative power. In fact, U.S. interests in the security and stability of South Vietnam were far greater[86] than those predicted by the interest asymmetry thesis. Vietnam was a "limited" war not because South Vietnam's fate was a peripheral U.S. interest, but because U.S. political elites believed that the use of force in proportion to U.S. interests might provoke Chinese military intervention and lead to a third world war. In the case of North Vietnam, its legendary resolve was not a consequence of its being a weak actor fighting for survival. As many commentators have since observed, the true sources of North Vietnam's resolve were nationalism[87] and revenge for the suffering caused by the U.S. strategic bombing campaign against the North Vietnamese people. According to Stanley Karnow, "As a practical strategy, however, the bombing backfired. American planners had predicted that it would drive the enemy to capitulation, yet not only did the North Vietnamese accept the sacrifices, but the raids rekindled their nationalistic zeal, so that many who may have disliked Communist rule joined the resistance to alien attack."[88]

Second, Mack is right that the United States was politically vulnerable, and that this vulnerability ultimately drove it from Vietnam in defeat. But his thesis assumes that political vulnerability will generally affect the ability of strong actors to defeat weak actors. The strategic interaction thesis brackets the conditions under which political vulnerability operates: It does so only when there is an unanticipated delay between the commitment of armed forces and victory.

Conclusions

Strong actors lose asymmetric conflicts when they adopt the wrong strategy vis-à-vis their weaker adversaries. Same-approach interactions—whether direct-direct or indirect-indirect—favor strong actors because they imply shared values, aims, and victory conditions. Because nothing therefore intervenes between raw power and goals, strong actors will win same-approach interactions

86. Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* pp. 377–378.
87. This is not to suggest that North Vietnam's was a monolithic nationalism. South Vietnamese communists had a national identity separate from that of Northerners. What united them strongly during the war was the presence of foreigners on Vietnamese soil. See Walker Connor, "Ethnology and the Peace of South Asia," *World Politics,* Vol. 22, No. 1 (October 1969), pp. 51–86; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* pp. 462, 534; and Herring, *America's Longest War,* p. 271.
88. Karnow, *Vietnam: A History,* p. 458.

in proportion to their advantage in relative power. Opposite-approach interactions—whether direct-indirect or indirect-direct—favor weak actors because they sacrifice values for time. This results in a significant delay between the commitment of armed forces and the attainment of objectives. Time then becomes the permissive condition for the operation of the political vulnerability that Mack and others rightly identify as attaching to strong actors in asymmetric conflicts.

THEORY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The strategic interaction thesis simultaneously supports, and in key ways mediates, the importance of relative material power in explaining conflict outcomes. As has often been observed, material power is useful for theory building because it is quantifiable and measurable in a way that courage, leadership, and dumb luck are not. This study has demonstrated empirically that on balance, relative material power is more than simply a methodologically useful concept; taken alone, it explains a majority of conflict outcomes since 1800. The strategic interaction thesis makes clear, however, the limitations of relative material power by highlighting the conditions under which it matters more or less.

This analysis suggests key policy implications for both weak and strong actors. For weak actors, successful defense against strong actors depends on an indirect strategy. Because indirect strategies such as GWS rely on social support, weak actors must work tirelessly to gain and maintain the sympathy or acquiescence of a majority of the population in question. Given the risks involved in either aiding or taking part in a guerrilla resistance, this in itself is no mean feat. Additionally, weak actors must have or gain access to the physical or political sanctuary necessary to make an indirect strategy a viable choice. For strong actors, the strategic interaction thesis suggests that weak adversaries employing an indirect defense will be difficult to defeat. Of course, not all or even most asymmetric conflicts need follow this pattern, but when they do, and when a resort to arms is the only viable option, how should a strong actor such as the United States react?

One response might be a resort to barbarism, which appears to be an effective strategy for defeating an indirect defense.[89] But even a cursory review of

89. This appears equally true of counterterrorism and terrorism. Laura K. Donohue analyzes the impact of British counterterrorist legislation in Northern Ireland and concludes that Britain's numerous "temporary" and "emergency" measures—which were never temporary, and which violated civil rights and due process—proved highly effective in the short term. Her analysis

postwar histories reveals that at best barbarism can be effective only as a military strategy: If the desired objective is long-term political control, barbarism invariably backfires. The French, for example, used torture to quickly defeat Algerian insurgents in the Battle of Algiers in 1957. But when French military brutality became public knowledge, it catalyzed political opposition to the war in France and stimulated renewed and intensified resistance by the non-French population of Algeria.[90] Within four years, France abandoned its claims in Algeria even though it had "won" the war. Barbarism thus sacrifices victory in peace for victory in war—a poor policy at best.[91]

An ideal U.S. strategic response in an asymmetric conflict therefore demands two central elements: (1) preparation of public expectations for a long war despite U.S. technological and material advantages, and (2) the development and deployment of armed forces specifically equipped and trained for COIN operations.[92] Without a national consensus and realistic expectations, the United States would be politically vulnerable in an asymmetric conflict. Without more special operations forces—the self-reliant and discriminate armed forces necessary to implement an ideal COIN strategy—what begins as a military operation against an isolated violent minority will tend to escalate into a war against an entire people.[93]

The United States must be prepared to fight and win both conventional and asymmetric or "small" wars. The strategic interaction thesis shows why the two missions demand two kinds of armed forces: one to defend U.S. interests in conventional wars, and one to defend them in asymmetric wars. If the United States, in other words, is to win future "boxing matches" against lightweight opponents who use their own version of the rope-a-dope, it will need fighters with more initiative than discipline, and more endurance than punching power.

---

suggests, however, that insurgents always found a way around such measures, eventually prompting yet another round of "emergency" restrictions. See Donohue, *Counter-terrorist Law and Emergency Powers in the United Kingdom, 1922–2000* (Portland, Or.: Irish Academic Press, 2001), pp. 322–323.

90. See Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," p. 180; and Asprey, *War in the Shadows,* pp. 669–671.

91. See Liddell Hart, *Strategy,* p. 370.

92. See, for example, Ernest May in Hoffmann et al., "Vietnam Reappraised," pp. 8, 9; Hoffmann, ibid., p. 10; and Cohen, "Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars," pp. 166–167.

93. See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars,* p. 187.

Appendix 1: Cases and Key Variables

War Name	Start	End	OUTCOME[1]	STRATINT[2]
Spain-Peru	1809	1816	1	0
Russo-Georgian	1816	1825	1	0
Pindaro War	1817	1818	1	0
Kandyan Rebellion	1817	1818	1	0
Greek War of Independence	1821	1828	0	1
First Anglo-Burmese	1823	1826	1	0
First Ashanti	1824	1826	1	0
Javanese	1825	1830	1	0
Bharatpuran	1825	1826	1	0
Russo-Circassian	1829	1840	1	0
Albanian	1830	1831	1	0
Belgian Independence	1830	1831	1	0
Murid War	1830	1859	1	0
First Polish	1831	1831	1	0
First Syrian	1831	1832	0	0
Texan	1835	1836	0	0
Second Seminole War	1835	1842	1	0
First Zulu	1838	1840	1	0
First British-Afghan	1838	1842	0	1
Franco-Algerian	1839	1847	1	0
Bosnian-Turkish	1841	1841	1	0
Baluchi-British	1843	1843	1	0
First Maori	1843	1848	1	0
Franco-Moroccan	1844	1844	1	0
First British-Sikh	1845	1846	1	0
First Kaffir War	1846	1847	1	0
Cracow Revolt	1846	1846	1	0
Austro-Sardinian	1848	1849	1	0
First Schleswig-Holstein	1848	1849	1	0
Hungarian	1848	1849	1	0
Second British-Sikh	1848	1849	1	0
Roman Republic	1849	1849	1	0
Second Kaffir	1850	1853	1	0
La Plata	1851	1852	1	0
Second Anglo-Burmese	1852	1853	1	0
First Turko-Montenegran	1852	1853	0	0
Third Seminole War	1855	1858	1	0
Yakima War	1855	1858	0	1
Anglo-Persian	1856	1857	1	0
Second Opium War	1856	1860	0	0
Kabylia Uprising	1856	1857	1	.
Tukulor-French War	1857	1857	1	0

War Name	Start	End	OUTCOME[1]	STRATINT[2]
French-Indochinese	1858	1863	1	0
Second Turko-Montenegran	1858	1859	0	0
Spanish-Moroccan	1859	1860	1	0
Italo-Roman	1860	1860	1	0
Second Maori	1860	1870	1	0
Apache and Navaho War	1860	1865	1	0
Taiping Rebellion	1860	1864	1	0
Nien Rebellion	1860	1868	1	0
Franco-Mexican	1862	1867	0	0
First Sioux War	1862	1864	1	0
Second Polish	1863	1864	1	0
Spanish-Santo Dominican	1863	1865	0	.
Second Schleswig-Holstein	1864	1864	1	0
Lopez War	1864	1870	1	1
Spanish-Chilean	1865	1866	1	0
British-Bhutanese	1865	1865	1	0
Second Sioux War	1865	1868	0	1
First Cretan	1866	1867	1	1
Ten Years' War	1868	1878	1	0
Algerian	1871	1872	1	.
Second Apache War	1871	1873	1	0
Second Ashanti	1873	1874	1	0
Tonkin	1873	1885	1	0
Dutch-Achinese	1873	1878	1	0
Red River Indian War	1874	1875	1	0
Balkan	1875	1877	1	1
Third Apache War	1876	1886	1	1
Third Sioux War	1876	1877	1	0
Ninth Kaffir	1877	1878	1	0
Russo-Turkoman	1878	1881	1	0
Second British-Afghan	1878	1880	1	0
British-Zulu	1879	1879	1	0
Gun War	1880	1881	1	0
First Boer War	1880	1880	0	0
Tunisian	1881	1882	1	.
Franco-Indochinese	1882	1884	1	0
Mahdist	1882	1885	0	0
First Franco-Madagascan	1883	1885	1	0
Sino-French	1884	1885	0	0
Russo-Afghan	1885	1885	1	0
Third Anglo-Burmese	1885	1886	1	0
First Mandigo-French War	1885	1885	1	0
First Italo-Ethiopian	1887	1887	0	0

War Name	Start	End	OUTCOME[1]	STRATINT[2]
Second Cretan	1888	1889	1	.
Dehomey	1889	1892	1	0
Second Senegalese	1890	1891	1	0
Messiah War	1890	1891	1	0
Congo Arabs	1892	1892	1	.
Franco-Thai	1893	1893	1	.
Third Ashanti	1893	1894	1	0
Matabele-British War	1893	1893	1	0
Sino-Japanese	1894	1895	0	0
Franco-Madagascan	1894	1895	1	0
Balian	1894	1894	1	.
Cuban	1895	1898	1	0
Italo-Ethiopian	1895	1896	0	0
Fourth Ashanti	1895	1896	1	0
Third Cretan	1896	1897	0	0
Druze-Turkish	1896	1896	1	.
First Philippine	1896	1898	0	1
Sudanese War	1896	1899	1	0
Greco-Turkish	1897	1897	1	0
Indian Muslim	1897	1898	1	0
Nigerian	1897	1897	1	0
Hut Tax	1898	1898	1	0
Second Philippine	1899	1902	1	0
Second Boer War	1899	1902	1	0
Somali Rebellion	1899	1905	1	0
Russo-Manchurian	1900	1900	0	0
Ilinden	1903	1903	1	0
Russo-Japanese War	1904	1905	0	0
South West African Revolt	1904	1905	1	1
Maji-Maji Revolt	1905	1906	1	1
Second Zulu War	1906	1906	1	0
Spanish-Moroccan	1909	1910	1	0
First Moroccan	1911	1912	1	0
First Balkan War	1912	1913	0	0
Tibetan War of Independence	1912	1913	0	0
Second Moroccan	1916	1917	1	.
Arab Revolt	1916	1918	0	1
Irish Troubles	1916	1921	0	1
Yunnan	1917	1918	1	.
First Sino-Tibetan	1918	1918	0	.
Russo-Polish	1919	1920	0	0
Lithuanian-Polish	1919	1920	1	0
Hungarian-Allies	1919	1919	1	0

War Name	Start	End	OUTCOME[1]	STRATINT[2]
Franco-Turkish	1919	1922	0	0
Third Afghan	1919	1919	1	0
Franco-Syrian	1920	1920	1	.
Iraqi-British	1920	1921	1	.
Sanusi	1920	1932	1	0
Riffian	1921	1926	1	.
Druze Rebellion	1925	1927	1	0
U.S.-Nicaraguan	1927	1933	1	1
Chinese Muslims	1928	1928	1	.
Chinese Civil War	1930	1935	1	0
Manchurian	1931	1933	0	.
Soviet-Turkestani	1931	1934	1	.
Italo-Ethiopian	1935	1936	1	0
Sino-Japanese	1937	1941	1	0
Chankufeng	1938	1938	0	0
Winter War	1939	1940	1	0
Franco-Thai	1940	1941	0	.
Indonesian Independence	1945	1946	0	0
Indochinese	1945	1954	0	0
Madagascan	1947	1948	1	.
First Kashmir	1947	1949	1	0
Palestine	1948	1949	0	0
Malayan Rebellion	1948	1957	1	0
Hyderabad	1948	1948	1	.
Korean Conflict	1950	1953	0	0
Sino-Tibetan	1950	1951	1	0
Philippines	1950	1952	1	0
Kenya	1952	1956	1	0
Tunisian Independence	1952	1954	0	.
Moroccan Independence	1953	1956	0	.
Algerian	1954	1962	0	0
British-Cypriot	1954	1959	0	0
Cameroon	1955	1960	0	.
Russo-Hungarian	1956	1956	1	0
Sinai	1956	1956	1	0
Tibetan	1956	1959	1	1
Cuba	1958	1959	0	1
South Vietnam	1960	1965	0	1
Congo	1960	1965	1	0
Kurdish	1961	1963	1	.
Angola-Portugal	1961	1975	0	.
Sino-Indian	1962	1962	1	0
Portugal-Guinea Bissau	1962	1974	0	1
Mozambique	1964	1975	0	1

War Name	Start	End	OUTCOME[1]	STRATINT[2]
Vietnam	1965	1975	0	0
Second Kashmir	1965	1965	0	0
Six-Day War	1967	1967	0	0
Israeli-Egyptian	1969	1970	0	0
Bangladesh	1971	1971	1	0
Philippine-Moro	1972	1980	1	0
Yom Kippur War	1973	1973	0	0
Turko-Cypriot	1974	1974	1	0
Eritrean	1974	1991	0	0
Kurdish Autonomy	1974	1975	1	0
East Timor	1974	1975	0	1
Vietnamese-Cambodian	1975	1979	1	0
Western Sahara	1975	1983	1	.
Chadian Civil War	1975	1988	1	0
Ethiopian-Somalian	1977	1978	1	0
Afghanistan	1978	1989	0	0
Sino-Vietnamese	1979	1979	1	0
Peruvian Civil War	1982	1992	1	0
Tamil Rebellion	1983	1990	0	1
Sino-Vietnamese	1985	1987	0	0
Gulf War	1990	1991	1	0
Iraq-Kuwait	1990	1990	1	0
Kurdish Rebellion	1991	.	.	0
Serbian Rebellion	1991	1996	0	1
Russo-Chechen	1994	1996	0	0

Number of cases = 197

A value of . indicates missing data.

[1] OUTCOME is the variable label for the conflict outcome. A value of 1 means that the strong actor won. A value of 0 means that the weak actor won, the war was a stalemate, or that it is ongoing.

[2] STRATINT is the variable label for strategic interaction. A value of 0 means that it was a same-approach interaction (direct-direct or indirect-indirect). A value of 1 means that it was an opposite-approach interaction (indirect-direct or direct-indirect).