

HOW THE STRONG LOSE WARS: TRANSFORMATIVE GOALS AND THE OUTCOME OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT: This work proposes an explanation of strong actor failure in asymmetric conflict. It proposes and develops the hypothesis of transformative and non-transformative goals and shows the correlation between strong actor objectives and the outcome of asymmetric conflicts. The central argument of this work gravitates around the theme that strong actors are more likely to lose if it pursues transformative goals and, on the contrary, is more likely to win if it pursues non-transformative goals. The hypothesis is supported with results of research on asymmetric conflicts which occurred between 1990 and 2008.

KEYWORDS: Asymmetric Conflicts, Transformative Goals, US, Great Powers, Post-Cold War

INTRODUCTION

Thucydides' famous remark in the Melian dialogue maintains that the 'strong do what they can and the weak do what they must'¹ is as relevant now as it was all those centuries ago. Power, that elusive concept, continues to be the engine of international politics. However, power does not, necessarily, equate to foreign policy success and history is replete with examples of strong actors unable to achieve their objectives vis-a-vis vastly inferior opponents. Asymmetrical conflicts, for instance, may balance between conventional and unconventional capabilities and render the stronger side unable to adequately deploy and project power where it is needed allowing the weaker side to inflict a heavy loss on the larger actor.

According to Arreguín-Toft, some 14% of all wars between 1816 and 2003 were asymmetric while an additional 37% were tagged as probably asymmetric.² The results of my own survey are in line with Arreguín-Toft's findings: 33% of all wars which commenced in

between 1990 and 2008 were asymmetric or probably asymmetric, and when the survey was limited only to interstate and extrastate wars, the percentage of asymmetric conflicts increased to 63%. Such findings suggest that asymmetric conflicts are rather common in international relations, but surprisingly they are among the least studied.³ In fact, the main-stream theories formulated during the Cold War focus mostly on hegemonic, major or systemic wars. And although they are highly useful in explaining causes and results of wars that erupted between great powers with relatively similar capabilities, they have little to say when it comes to asymmetric conflicts in which the belligerents' capabilities are incomparable. Moreover, theories that are based on the Thucydidean notion of power hardly explain failures of strong actors in asymmetric wars, and according to Arreguín-Toft, such an outcome is typical of almost 30% of all asymmetric conflicts.⁴

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Following the Cold War, the question of asymmetry, in particular the riddle of strong actors' failures, has drawn increasing attention of IR scholars such as Arreguín-Toft, Merom and Record, who have made significant contributions to the debate on asymmetric conflicts. Nonetheless, gaps continue to exist in theories of asymmetric conflicts.⁵

In the search for answers as to why strong states may lose a war against a weaker actor a series of mutually reinforcing variables are assessed. For instance Arreguín-Toft examines strategic interactions between strong and weak actors; Merom stresses the central role of democratic regimes, while Record focuses on external assistance that may strengthen the weaker side. There is agreement among these three scholars that a key reason behind a strong actor's failure against a weaker foe, lies in factors external to the goals of the former.

This work argues to the contrary; that strong states fail because of, not despite, its political goals. I also indicate that the political goals of the strong actor are correlated to the outcome of an asymmetric conflict. This line of argumentation is based on the general hypothesis that great powers in war with weak actors might either pursue "transformative" or "non-transformative" political goals. The former refers to a situation in which the strong actor's aim is to change the political, economic and/or social system of the weak. System transformation might be an end in itself or a means to dif-

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ferent political goals. On the other hand, the strong actor pursues non-transformative goals if he largely accepts the political, social and economic system of the weak. The strong uses its military power to force the weak to particular behaviour (either to do something or refrain from a certain action), but does not intend to change its political or socioeconomic order. In other words, the strong actor might achieve its goals without coerced transformation of the weak.

The idea of transformative and non-transformative goals is fundamental for my second hypothesis. I argue that in the case of asymmetric conflict the strong actor is more likely to lose if he pursues transformative goals, and on the contrary, is more likely to win if he pursues non-transformative goals. Such a hypothesis might seem quite conventional, because the attainment of transformative goals appears more difficult than the attainment of non-transformative goals. Transformation of the weaker actor's political or social system is definitely costly, lengthy and by all accounts an extremely ambitious task. Therefore, it should not be surprising if the strong actor fails. However, such a simple explanation of the strong actor's failure is unsatisfying and too many questions remain unanswered. Are transformative goals attainable? If not, what makes them unattainable and why do the strong actors strive for them? But if goals are within reach of the strong actors, why do they not succeed? What mistakes do they commit? Do they use their enormous resources adequately; squander them unwisely or maybe just cut corners?

In the following sections of this article I briefly present recent findings on asymmetric conflicts, and further develop the idea of transformative and non-transformative goals. To support my hypotheses I present results of research on asymmetric conflicts occurring in the period 1990-2008. The research was primary based on the Sarkees and Wayman data-set.⁶ Lists of cases are presented in the appendix in table 1 and table 2.

DEFINING ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS AND THE RIDDLE OF STRONG ACTORS' FAILURES

In this survey, I adopt the definition of asymmetric conflict that is generally compliant with the definition used by Arreguín-Toft.

Conflicts are restricted to wars (1000 battle-related deaths per year), and are coded as asymmetric when the halved product of the strong actor's armed forces and population at the start of the conflict exceeds the simple product of the weak actor's armed forces and population by at least five to one.⁷ Actors mean states, coalitions of states and nonstate entities, such as rebel or terrorist groups. Thus, the definition of asymmetric conflict used in this article includes wars between two or more states, and also between states and non-state actors. The ratio of asymmetry, here 1:5 is, in fact, a subjective matter. For instance Paul, in his description of asymmetric conflict, uses a 1:2 ratio⁸ and in many works on counterinsurgency strategy or small wars, the asymmetry between parties is automatically assumed and not measured further.⁹ However, setting the threshold of asymmetry at the level of a ratio of 1:5 has at least two advantages. First, it shows a discrepancy in actors' material power and proves that the asymmetric conflict is truly a fight between the proverbial David and Goliath. Second, it facilitates examination on a wider spectrum of conflicts.

So far my definition of asymmetric conflict is much the same as that of Arreguín-Toft. Nevertheless, I introduce significant amendments. In my research, I confine asymmetric conflicts to interstate and extrastate wars and, moreover, to those conflicts that are initiated by the stronger actor.¹⁰ Although the first restriction excludes civil wars from the survey, this does not mean that there are no "asymmetric civil wars." Measuring the material power of civil war belligerents is difficult and sometimes impossible due to poor or non-existing data, but there are still a few examples of civil wars in which asymmetry between the actors is undoubted (e.g. the two Chechnya wars).¹¹ There are substantial differences between asymmetric civil wars, and asymmetric inter- or extrastate wars. Firstly, in a civil war, the interests and goals of the strong actor are markedly different from those in an inter- and extrastate war. In a civil war, the territorial integrity of the stronger actor is usually at stake. Such a situation hardly ever occurs in an asymmetric inter and extra-state war. The territorial integrity of the stronger actor was threatened (however, indirectly) only in 2 of 7 asymmetric inter- and extrastate conflicts that erupted in the period of 1990-2008. Those cases are the two wars between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fought in northern Iraq from 1991 to 1992 and in 1997. In fact,

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those conflicts are a reflection of civil war in Turkey between the Turkish government and the Kurdish minority.¹² In the other 5 cases the weak actor did not pose a direct, if any, threat to the strong. Secondly, the risk of withdrawal from civil war is much higher because of vital interests that are threatened. Withdrawal from any war before achieving the main goals is a tough decision for any great power and creates a real dilemma for leaders: should we fight on and sacrifice more resources until we achieve our goals or should we accept our failure, take the risk of withdrawal and search for the best way out? In civil wars however, premature withdrawal is even more hazardous because there is a high chance that the unresolved problem will reoccur and the territorial integrity of the strong actor will be threatened again. Such a situation, in fact, is quite common: in the last two decades Russia fought two wars against Chechnya, Indonesia fought twice in the province of Aceh and the Philippines fought three times against Moro rebels. Threatened vital interests of the strong actor (especially territorial integrity) and the high risk of withdrawal have a major impact on the dynamics and outcomes of asymmetric conflicts. I argue that asymmetric civil wars are more civil than asymmetric, and therefore I exclude civil wars from my definition of asymmetric conflict.

The second amendment to the definition limits asymmetric conflicts to those wars initiated by strong actors. In such a case, the stronger is not only five (or more) times stronger than its adversary, but it also decides when to attack, where and how; setting its objectives freely and is, obviously, unsurprised by the attack, so is prepared. Statistically, asymmetric conflicts initiated by strong actors are the most common case. My survey shows that between 1990-2008, there were 11 conflicts that can be classified as interstate or extrastate war. Seven were asymmetric, and all were initiated by the stronger actor.¹³ In the case of civil wars that proportion is much different. Out of 15 asymmetric or probable asymmetric civil wars, only 6 (40%) were initiated by the stronger actor.

In sum, I define asymmetric conflict as war in which the strong actor's halved material power exceeds the overall material power of the weak actor by at least five to one, where territorial integrity of the strong actor is not threatened by the weak actor, and where the war is initiated by the strong. Despite asymmetry, both in material capabilities and the situation (after all, it is the strong

who decides when to attack), the strong actor does not always win. The best known examples of strong actor failures are the Vietnam War and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. In the post-Cold War era, most asymmetric conflicts have been won by the strong actor. However, the two most recent conflicts – the Iraq War and NATO intervention in Afghanistan – do not follow that pattern. Few would claim that the US (and its allies) won a decisive victory in Iraq, let alone Afghanistan, but should we categorise them as complete failures? Judging victory or defeat in contemporary wars, in which there is an observable ‘decline in the occurrence of clear-cut victory,’¹⁴ is difficult and debatable. Carroll, for instance, distinguishes fifteen (!) different conceptions of how to evaluate victory in war.¹⁵ But, in the case of asymmetric conflict, such an evaluation should be based on whether the strong actor has accomplished its goals. A conflict initiated by a much stronger actor, and moreover, in which the weak actor does not pose a direct military threat to the strong, clearly falls into the famous Clausewitzian definition of war as ‘a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.’¹⁶ It is the strong actor who sets its political objectives and decides to use military force to accomplish them. However, sometimes the strong actor does not succeed; it fails to achieve the pre-war goals and eventually is forced to abandon them.

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One of the first explanations of the strong actors’ failure was proposed in 1975 by Mack. He argues that asymmetry in material power between belligerents implies asymmetry in interests. Mack contends that for the weak actor, struggling for survival, the asymmetric conflict is in fact “total war,” whereas for the strong actor, whose survival is not threatened, the war is only “limited.”¹⁷ The low interests of the strong actor creates political vulnerability. If the war drags on and its costs increase, the strong actor’s public opinion or competing elites push for quick withdrawal from the conflict. The weak actor does not face similar pressure, because the highest interest, survival, increases unity and determination.¹⁸ According to Mack, asymmetry in interests implies political vulnerability, and political vulnerability explains the outcome of the conflict. Although this seems to be true in the case of the strong actor’s defeat, it does not apply to the most common outcome of an asymmetric conflict, which is the situation in which the stronger wins. In the Russo-Georgian War (2008), Russia was the stronger actor with

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rather low interests, as its survival was never threatened by Georgia. On the other hand, the sovereignty and survival of Georgia was in real danger, but contrary to Mack's thesis, Russia clinched a quick and decisive victory. Mack assumes that strong actors will lose in lengthy, guerilla wars, however, he does not explain why some conflicts drag on and some not.

Many theories of asymmetric conflict suffer from a similar problem of generality. They explain few conflicts in detail, but leave too many exceptions. For example, Merom suggests that democracies are more prone to fail in small wars than autocracies. He states that democracies lose in asymmetric conflicts because 'they find it extremely difficult to escalate the level of violence and brutality to that which can secure victory.'¹⁹ Again, a few cases verify Merom's thesis, while several others do not. His theory does not explain why the US lost in Vietnam despite the heavy casualties inflicted on the Vietnamese population. Moreover, it says little about the failures of autocracies in asymmetric conflicts (e.g. the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan), and also the successes of democracies in those kinds of wars (e.g. the Gulf War, the Kosovo War, 1999).

To avoid problems of generality, Arreguín-Toft backed his hypothesis of "strategic interaction" with extensive quantitative research. His argument is as follows. Actors come to the conflict with an estimate of resources and a strategy, that is to say a plan for the use of those resources in pursuit of specified goals.²⁰ Therefore, when the actor with more resources loses, the reason of his failure must lie in the strategy. Arreguín-Toft argues that 'strong actors will lose asymmetric conflicts when they use the wrong strategy vis-à-vis their opponents' strategy.'²¹ Although that argument was confirmed in quantitative research, it suffers from some weaknesses. Firstly, Arreguín-Toft's definitions of different strategies that are available to belligerents (e.g. barbarism) are sometimes confusing and inconsistent. As a result, the clarity of the main hypothesis is lost in speculation whether a particular strategy used on the battlefield was barbarism or not. Secondly, Arreguín-Toft argues that because every strategy has an ideal counterstrategy, actors who are able to predict their adversary's strategy will 'dramatically improve their chances of victory by choosing and implementing that counterstrategy.'²² For example, the best counterstrategy for guerilla warfare is barbarism, and for "direct defense" is "direct attack."

However, actors are not entirely free to choose the ideal strategy that will guarantee success. They are constrained by many factors: resources possessed, internal politics, culture and traditions (etc).²³ Moreover, in the case of asymmetric conflict, when a weak actor selects a strategy, it is largely determined by available resources, as it cannot implement a strategy involving resources not at its disposal. Consequently, prediction about the weak actor's strategy should be relatively easy. In the Afghanistan War, the Taliban learned quickly that in an open, large battle they are doomed to lose, and while the war continued they switched almost entirely to guerilla warfare.²⁴ Insurgents using guerilla warfare should not be a surprise for anyone.

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Actors are not entirely independent when choosing their strategy, and in many cases the strategy eventually deployed might be easily predicted. Thus, if Arreguín-Toft's hypothesis is correct, and the sources of the strong actor's failure lie in "strategic interaction," the outcome of the conflict should be known from the very beginning. The strong will lose if it chooses an unsuitable strategy for the strategy employed by his adversary. But, if the adversary's strategy is not a surprise, or at least should not be a surprise, why then, does the strong actor choose the wrong counterstrategy? That means that we should search for the solution to the riddle of the strong actor's failure somewhere else than in "strategic interaction."

TRANSFORMATIVE GOALS AND NON-TRANSFORMATIVE GOALS

Unlike Arreguín-Toft, I argue that strong actors lose because they pursue transformative goals. Actors come to the conflict not only with a strategy and resources, but also with certain political goals. The strong actors' political objectives in asymmetric conflicts are different and vary from case to case. For example, in 1999 the NATO allies waged an air campaign against Yugoslavia in order to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, two years later the US intervened in Afghanistan to topple the Taliban government in retaliation for its support of al-Qaida, and in 2008 Russia attacked Georgia on the pretext of protecting Russian citizens, but seemingly to stop NATO enlargement into the post-Soviet space. Although the political goals of such 'top-dogs' appear to be entirely different, there is a common

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denominator. The strong actors' goals might be easily divided into two separate groups: goals that require transformation of the weak actors' political, economic and/or social system, and those that do not impose such requirements. I called the latter "non-transformative goals," as the strong actor might achieve them and eventually succeed in the conflict without the need for coerced transformation of the weak actor's system. For example, consider two cases: Kosovo (1999) and the Russo-Georgian War (2008).

Kosovo

On 24 March 1999, NATO launched a bombing campaign to force Yugoslavia to withdraw its troops from Kosovo and to stop ethnic cleansing in that province. The air strikes however, proved to be ineffective. Yugoslavia mounted strong resistance and even increased attacks in Kosovo. Apparently, it was the planned ground invasion, and not the air strikes, that coerced Yugoslavia to negotiate and withdraw from Kosovo.²⁵ On 10 June 1999, NATO suspended its bombing campaign. The war was over and won. NATO achieved its pre-war goals of stopping ethnic cleansing and forcing Yugoslav troops to leave Kosovo. Significantly, the strong actor, NATO, achieved its goals without transforming the weak actor's (Yugoslavia) political system. Initially, NATO did not intend to overthrow Milošević's government and to install a more peaceful, democratic or pro-West regime. And, even if later preparation for a ground offensive and a plan for ousting Milošević were key factors that pressed Milošević to concede defeat and yield to NATO's demands, the invasion of Yugoslavia was never launched. NATO avoided entanglement in a troublesome invasion, searching for Milošević and probably fighting against guerrilla forces somewhere in the mountains of the Balkan Peninsula.

The Russo-Georgian War

Similarly, in the example of the Russo-Georgia war (2008). Russian political objectives were not entirely clear. At that time, few analysts suggested that Russian goals were much wider than maintaining control over the Georgian separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They suggested that the Russian military op-

eration against Georgia was aimed at thwarting Georgia's – and Ukraine's – NATO aspirations and also at strengthening Russian influence over energy producing states in Central Asia.²⁶ If accurate, Russia undoubtedly succeeded. A few months after the Russo-Georgian war, Sestanovich noted:

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Those NATO members that had endorsed eventual membership for Georgia and Ukraine are now divided on the issue. Those former Soviet states that had viewed closer cooperation with NATO (...) as a critical lifeline to the outside world now wonder whether this is still good idea. Energy producers in Central Asia that were considering new pipelines outside the Russian network may see such projects as too risky.²⁷

It seems that Russia achieved what it wanted when, in early August, it ended military operations against Georgia. Russia succeeded without the necessity of occupation and transformation of its Caucasian neighbour. But is it correct? Did Russia not aim to transform Georgia into a pro-Russian state? Such transformation would inevitably call for the ousting of the government of the anti-Russian and pro-Western President of Georgia, Saakashvili. However, Russia did not make a direct attempt to topple Saakashvili. Obviously Russian leaders would have greatly welcomed the fall of Saakashvili, in the same way that Western powers would have been pleased about Milošević fall in 1999. But, in both cases, neither Russia nor NATO made a serious, direct attempt to change the political system of Georgia and Yugoslavia. Both actors were able to achieve their goals without resorting to the transformation of their adversaries' political orders.

The Gulf Wars

A similar mechanism also occurred during the Gulf War. As (then) Secretary of State Baker put it, US administration officials 'would not shed any tears' if Saddam Hussein fell, but they were also 'careful not to embrace it as a war aim or political aim.'²⁸ The US achieved its primary goals of driving all Iraqi forces from Kuwait. However, the quick and successful operation had a price. Hussein remained in power, and that created the impression that the job

was unfinished. Twelve years later US President George W. Bush decided to resolve the Iraqi problem once and for all.

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The invasion of Iraq began on 19 March 2003, and after two months the mission seemed to be accomplished. On 02 May 2003 Bush declared that the major combat operation in Iraq had ended. The Iraqi government was overthrown, and in December 2003 Hussein was captured. The US undoubtedly prevailed in the Battle of Iraq. They achieved their main, pre-war goal; toppling Hussein. However, as it quickly turned out, the fall of Hussein was not the end of the war. On the contrary; it was the beginning. The US found itself involved in a long, costly and unpopular war in Iraq. And, after eight years of US occupation and full withdrawal of their troops from Iraq, it is still hard to tell who won. The thing that bothers many scholars, and probably a few politicians, was put forward by Rose who asks:

How could this happen? How could the strongest power in modern history, fighting a rematch against a much lesser opponent at a time and place of its own choosing, find itself again woefully unprepared for the aftermath?²⁹

The answer might be found in the actor's political goals. The US and their allies, as mentioned above, clinched an easy victory in the Gulf and in the Kosovo War. They achieved their political objectives in a relatively quick and cheap way. A similar scenario was drafted and enacted in the Iraq War. The US Army overwhelmed Iraqi forces and easily seized control of Baghdad. But, unlike the Gulf or Kosovo Wars, the US goals in Iraq in 2003 included ousting Iraqi leaders. From that moment, the US – intentionally or not – has been pursuing transformative goals.

TRANSFORMATIVE GOALS

In theory, an actor has transformative goals if it aims to change the political, economic and/or social order of its adversaries, or if its goals require such transformation. Thus, transformation might be an end in itself or a means to different political ends. In practice, however, states hardly ever take on the challenge of transformation as an end in itself. More commonly, they perceive transformation as

a necessary tool for different goals. Usually, the strong actor decides to transform the weak actor's political, economic or even social system if it considers that the reason of conflict lies in the nature of the weak actor. Therefore, the strong actor in order to ensure that in the future the weak will not pose a threat to its interests; tries to change the nature of the weak by imposing on him new political, economic and social institutions. At that point, transformative goals might be referred to as so-called state-building or nation-building policy.

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The attainment of transformative goals is never easy. It usually involves military occupation of a particular territory, which is often costly and risky.³⁰ Furthermore, the creation of new political and social institutions that would not only act compliantly with the occupier's interests, but also would be able to survive once the occupation is ended, is no easier. The ability to shape local society in the short time of occupation is limited. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the number of successful outcomes of nation-building is very small.³¹

It is also unsurprising that great powers are unwilling to pursue transformative goals, even if they recognise that the reason for conflict lies in the nature of their adversaries' political system. The case of the Iraq War is no exception. In September 2003 Rumsfeld stated that the US is 'not in Iraq to engage in nation-building.'³² The main political and military goal of the US was to get rid of Hussein, without engaging in Iraq afterwards.³³ The US perceived that the reason of the conflict of interests with Iraq lay in Hussein and the Ba'ath party, but ignored the fact that the dictator and his party were a fundamental part of the Iraqi political order. Therefore, resolving the conflict by ousting Hussein and the de-Baathification of Iraq inevitably led to the transformation of its political order.

As stated above, transformative goals are a difficult attainment for any actor, regardless of the power possessed. Long and costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both waged by 'the strongest power in modern history,' provide compelling evidence of that thesis. On the other hand, the examples of the Gulf War, intervention in Kosovo, and the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 show that strong actors prevail over their weaker adversaries, if the strong pursue non-transformative goals. In these cases, it is the logic of power portrayed by Thucydides in the Melian Dialogue that explains the results of conflicts. The superior military power of the strong actors enabled

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them to achieve their pre-war goals in a very short time. But the same military power seems ineffective and insufficient in pursuit of transformative goals. Transformation of the weaker actor's political or social system is an ambitious and demanding task. And even for that reason, the strong actor is more likely to lose if it pursues transformative goals.

But what if the strong loses, because transformative goals are simply unobtainable? One might argue that the political and social institutions imposed by the outside power are too artificial and fragile, and therefore are unable to survive when the outside power is gone. Furthermore, the argument holds that the formation of any social institutions is a lengthy, grassroots process, and thus it is impossible to create a new institution on an ad hoc basis. History shows that successful transformation is extremely rare, but at the same time it also demonstrates that transformation is possible.

US occupations of Germany and Japan after WWII are serve as examples. But also, the Soviet transformation of East European states might be considered as a success of the USSR. Although the USSR intervened a few times, those interventions were never lengthy and only in the case of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 did the intervention lead to war. By and large, for nearly half a century, East European states acted according to the interests of the USSR. Another interesting case is the US invasion of Panama at the end of 1989. The primary military objective was to capture General Manuel Noriega and overthrow his regime.³⁴ The US achieved these goals and installed a new government. Shortly afterwards the US withdrew.

Although the examples of successful transformation differ a lot, they show that transformative goals are, at times, obtainable by the strong actors. Why then, have the US and their allies encountered such difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan? The answer to this question lies in the relationship between the political objectives and the strategy employed. The US chose the wrong strategy for their political goals in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their initial strategy, almost entirely based on military power, was an effective tool for the attainment of non-transformative goals, but failed in the more delicate task of transformation. That however, poses another question: why did the US employ the wrong strategy? The answer might be found in the false optimism of the stronger actor,

which expects that due to military superiority, the war would be quick, cheap and successful. The more power the actor possesses and the bigger the gap between it and its adversary, the higher are the expectations of easy success in the forthcoming war. That, in turn, creates false optimism, which makes the strong actor prone to flaws in planning for conflict.³⁵ The US administration neglected planning the post-invasion phase of the Iraq War (so-called “Phase IV”), which in turn caused enormous military and political difficulties. Other explanations of a poorly chosen strategy consider global hegemony, strategic culture and the domestic policy of the US. Rose, for instance, identifies four separate factors, both inside and outside the US government, which led to mistakes in preparing and implementing strategy for the Iraq War. These are: a dysfunctional national security decision making process; an obedient and blinkered uniformed military; a trusting Congress and public; and global hegemony.³⁶ Indeed, such explains the process that preceded the invasion of Iraq, but there is also a visible pattern in the way the US government chose its political and military goals toward Iraq as well as Afghanistan. The main goals were to overthrow the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the Hussein regime in Iraq. But the second priority was to ‘keep the coalition footprint modest’ and ‘not to engage in what some call nation-building.’³⁷ In other words, the US planned to overthrow the regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, and at the same time planned to avoid any deeper involvement in those countries. This however, proved to be contradictory, because ousting the Taliban and Hussein pushed the US into major engagement in post-invasion Afghanistan and Iraq. From this perspective, the US mistake was not the fact that they pursue transformative goals with unsuitable strategy (i.e. largely based on military power), but the fact that they perceived those goals as if they were non-transformative. Therefore, the US did not develop a feasible plan for transforming the Afghani and Iraqi political systems after ousting the Taliban and Hussein..

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TRANSFORMATIVE GOALS AND OUTCOMES OF CONFLICTS: A CONCLUSION

The transformative goal thesis may help predict and explain the outcomes of asymmetric conflicts. Accordingly, the strong actor is

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more likely to lose if it pursues transformative goals, and contrarily, is more likely to win if pursuing non-transformative goals. Between 1990 and 2008 there were seven inter- and extrastate conflicts that may be tagged as asymmetric.³⁸ In three of them the strong actor pursued non-transformative goals. These were: the Gulf War, the War for Kosovo and the Russo-Georgia War. In all of them the strong actor clinched decisive victory and achieved the pre-war goals. Moreover, none of these conflicts lasted more than one year, and in the case of Russo-Georgia War it was a matter of days.

In the cases of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars intentions of the strong actor (whether goals were transformative or not) were not entirely clear. Although the US claimed it would not follow any transformative goals either in Afghanistan or in Iraq, it found itself transforming the political and social systems of both. To explain that, let me consider two phases of each of those wars. In the Sarkees and Wayman data-set, the Iraq War is coded as two conflicts: The Invasion of Iraq and the Iraqi Resistance. The war in Afghanistan is coded similarly. In the cases of the Invasion of Afghanistan and the Invasion of Iraq, the strong actor achieved its pre-war goals in a very short time. It took the US three months to topple the Taliban in Afghanistan and roughly the same time to oust Hussein in Iraq. However, as presented above, overthrowing the leadership of any state should be regarded as the beginning of the pursuit of transformative goals, because it leads to major changes in the political order of that state. In regimes where there is no strong political opposition to carry out transformation once the regimes' leadership is ousted by an outside power, it is the latter that shoulders the responsibility and costs of transformation.

The failure in transformation may result in restoration of former elites or in more severe conditions (e.g. civil war or the emergence of failed states). Obviously, none of these outcomes is favourable for the strong actor. It may threaten its interests, push for another intervention or reduce its international prestige, and in domestic politics it may be a reason for political turbulence (e.g. in democratic regimes, failure in asymmetric conflict may lead to failure in elections). These are a few reasons why the US did not withdraw immediately after ousting the Taliban government or Hussein.

Instead it engaged in long occupations and transformations of Afghanistan and Iraq. From that perspective, the US's pre-war goals were transformative, even though the Bush administration tried to ignore that fact.³⁹

But what about the outcome of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars? Although the US withdrew its troops from Iraq, the results of both conflicts are still unknown. However, what we know about the duration, severity and relative costs of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars suggests that both may be perceived as the failure of the US. The Iraqi conflict lasted 8 years. The Afghanistan War – after a decade of fighting – is still unfolding. Material costs, and the number of casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, have significantly exceeded the costs and casualties of any asymmetric conflict since the end of the Cold War. Worse still is that the outcome of the Iraq War, let alone Afghanistan, is dubious. The US is still far removed from the attainment of its goals; that is the creation of a sustainable political system in Iraq and Afghanistan that would be able to survive after the US withdrawal. In other words, it is highly possible that the strong actor would not achieve its transformative goals.

The last two examined cases are two interventions of Turkey in northern Iraq against the PKK. In those conflicts Turkish goals were non-transformative as it aimed to destroy the PKK's bases in Iraq. However, as noted above, the Turkish interventions in northern Iraq were a reflection of the intra-state war between Turkey and the Kurds in the 1990s. And, although the interventions were successful in military terms, they neither resolved the Kurdish problem nor brought the civil war to an end.

This is characteristic of asymmetric civil wars in which the government side is unable to attain transformative goals towards separatist ethnic or political groups. Failure to integrate such entities into the strong actor's political and social system results in long civil wars, low-intensity conflicts, terrorism and repeated interventions.⁴⁰ The internal Turkish-Kurd conflict is a compelling example. The first war between the PKK and Turkey erupted in 1984 and lasted until early 1986, after which the conflict continued at below war level (1000 battle related deaths). By 1991 the conflict had again reached the level of an intra-state war and lasted until 1999.⁴¹ Other similar examples are the Kashmir Insurgents War, the Chechnya Wars and the Aceh Wars.

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TABLE I Asymmetric inter-state and extra-state wars 1990–2008

War name	Participants	Initiator	Strong actor's goals	Outcome
Gulf War (1990–1991)	Invasion of Kuwait Iraq vs. Kuwait	Strong actor	Trans.	Third Party Intervention
U.S. Military Response	U.S. and allies vs. Iraq	Strong	Non-trans.	Strong actor wins
First PKK in Iraq (1991–1992)	Turkey vs. PKK	Strong	Non-trans.	Stalemate
Second PKK in Iraq (1997)	Turkey vs. PKK	Strong	Non-trans.	Stalemate
War for Kosovo (1999)	NATO vs. Yugoslavia	Strong	Non-trans.	Strong actor wins
Afghanistan War (2001–present)	NATO vs. Al Qaida, Taliban	Strong	Trans.	Ongoing
Iraq War (2003–2011)	US and allies vs. Iraqi, Al Qaida	Strong	Trans.	Unknown
Russo-Georgian (2008)	Russia vs. Georgia	Strong	Non-trans.	Strong actor wins

TABLE 2 Asymmetric and probable* asymmetric civil wars 1990–2008			
War name	Participants	Initiator	Outcome
Kashmir Insurgents War (1990–2005)	India vs. Kashmiri guerrillas	Weak actor	Stalemate
Shiite and Kurdish War (1991)	Iraq vs. Shiites, Kurds	Weak	Strong actor wins
Turkish Kurds War (1991–1999)	Turkey vs. PKK	Weak	Stalemate
Dniestrian War (1991–1992)	Moldova vs. Dniestria	Weak	Weak actor wins
Abkhazia Revolt (1993–1994)	Georgia vs. Abkhazia	Strong	Weak actor wins
1st Chechnya War (1994–1996)	Russia vs. Chechnya	Weak	Weak actor wins
Croatia-Krajina War (1995)	Croatia vs. Krajina Serbs	Weak	Strong actor wins
Iraqi Kurds War (1996)	Iraq vs. PUK	Weak	Stalemate
Kosovo Independence War (1998–1999)	Yugoslavia vs. KLA	Strong	Third Party Intervention
1st Aceh War (1999–2002)	Indonesia vs. GAM	Weak	Stalemate
2nd Chechnya War (1999–2003)	Russia vs. Chechnya	Weak	Strong actor wins
1st Philippine-Moro War (2000–2001)	Philippines vs. MILF	Strong	Stalemate
2nd Philippine-Moro War (2003)	Philippines vs. MILF	Strong	Stalemate
2nd Aceh War (2003–2004)	Indonesia vs. GAM	Strong	Strong actor wins
Philippine Joint Offensive (2005–2006)	Philippines vs. MILF, NPA	Strong	Stalemate

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The mistaken belief that it is possible to overthrow the rulers of any state, without engagement afterwards, was the reason for such enormous difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, as RAND analysts note in their work on counterinsurgency, “poor beginnings do not necessarily lead to poor ends”.⁴² The same can be said about the pursuit of transformative goals. Mistakes may be rectified, strategy adjusted, and eventually the strong actor may achieve his goals and win the war. Nevertheless, lives that were lost as a consequence of initial mistakes would not be returned.

So, what lessons can be drawn from the last two decades of asymmetric conflicts? Firstly, policymakers determined to use military force must be extremely careful in setting their political objectives. They must be aware that pursuing transformative goals is a demanding and risky task in which even great powers are likely to fail. Secondly, they must be cautious when choosing their strategy. Employing unsuitable strategy for particular political goals, especially transformative, might be a reason of higher costs or even eventual defeat in the conflict. Above all, policymakers should adhere to Clausewitz’s golden rule:

No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.⁴³

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NOTE: The title of this work is paraphrased from Ivan Arreguín-Toft’s article ‘How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict,’ found in *International Security* 26:1, 2001.

NOTES TO PAGES

- 1 Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), 402.
- 2 Ivan Arreguín-Toft. *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20.
- 3 See Gil Merom. *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3; Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars* (2005), 20. Asymmetric conflicts are not only common, but they are also relevant. Great powers are involved in most of them, and in many cases asymmetric conflict has had a strong impact on domestic and foreign

- policy of great powers (e.g. Vietnam War, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan).
- 4 Arreguín-Toft. *How the Weak Win Wars*. (2005), p. 3-4.
 - 5 See Jeffrey Record. *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win* (Potomac Books, 2007); Arreguín-Toft. *How the Weak Win Wars* (2005). Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars*.
 - 6 See Meredith R. Sarkees and Frank W. Wayman. *Resort to War 1816-2007* (Washington: CQ Press, 2010).
 - 7 Ivan Arreguín-Toft. *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*. *International Security* 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), 96. According to Arreguín-Toft halving strong actor power simulates the tendency of strong actors to have diverse security interests and commitments.
 - 8 T.V. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 20.
 - 9 On small wars see: Eliot E. Cohen. Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars. *International Security* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 1984); Andrew Mack. Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars. *World Politics* 27, No. 2 (January 1975); Hew Strachan ed., *Big Wars and Small Wars* (London: Routledge, 2006). Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace*, (Basic Books, 2003) On COIN see Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers* (RAND Corporation, 2010); Bruce Hoffman. Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, (2006).
 - 10 I use the terms "extra-state" and "inter-state" wars according to Sarkees and Wayman, *Resort to War*.
 - 11 For instance the material power ratio between Russia and Chechnya during the Second Chechnya War was approximately 1:35 in favor of Russia, whereas in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 it was "only" 1:16.
 - 12 See Sarkees and Wayman, *Resort to War*, 327-328 and 455.
 - 13 For asymmetric conflicts initiated by the weaker actor see: Paul. *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*.
 - 14 Robert Mandel. Defining postwar victory. In Angstrom, Jan; Duyvesteyn, Isabelle. (eds). *Understanding Victory and Defeat in Contemporary War*. (London: Routledge, 2007), 18.
 - 15 Berenice A. Carroll. How Wars End. *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 4 (1969).
 - 16 Carl von Clausewitz. (ed.). *On War*. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 605.
 - 17 Andrew Mack. Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars. *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1975), 181.
 - 18 Mack. *Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars*. p. 182.
 - 19 Merom. *How Democracies Lose Small Wars*, 15.
 - 20 Arreguín-Toft. *How the Weak Win Wars*. (2005) p. 23.

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- 21 Arreguín-Toft. *How the Weak Win Wars*. (2001) p. 95.
- 22 Arreguín-Toft. *How the Weak Win Wars*. (2001) p. 104.
- 23 On internal politics and cultural constraints see Cohen. Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars. and also: Jeffrey S. Lantis and Darryl Howlett. Strategic Culture. In Baylis, John. (ed.). *Strategy in the Contemporary World*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 24 See Michael O'Hanlon. Staying Power. *Foreign Affairs* 89, No. 5 (September/October 2010).
- 25 See Sarkees and Wayman. *Resort to War*. p.181-182; Jacob Bercovitch and Judith Fretter. *Regional Guide to International Conflict and Management from 1945-2003*. (Washington: CQ Press, 2004), p. 255. And also: Daniel L. Bayman and Matthew C. Waxman. Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate. *International Security* 24, No. 4 (Spring 2000).
- 26 Stephen Sestanovich. What Has Moscow Done? *Foreign Affairs* 87, No. 6 (November/December 2008). Charles King. The Five-Day War. *Foreign Affairs* 87, No. 6 (November/December 2008). On Russo-Georgian War of 2008 see also: Ronald D. Asmus. *A Little War that Shook the World*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr. (eds). *The Guns of August 2008*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009).
- 27 Sestanovich. What Has Moscow Done? p. 25.
- 28 James A. Baker with Thomas M. DeFrank. *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992*. (New York: Putnam, 1995) p. 435, quoted in Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 217.
- 29 Rose, *How Wars End*, 239.
- 30 See David M. Edelstein. *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
- 31 Francis Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Profile Books, 2005), 50-51.
- 32 Donald Rumsfeld at the Eisenhower National Security Conference, September 25, 2003, available at www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1079.
- 33 Rose, *How Wars End*, 259.
- 34 Bercovitch and Fretter, *Regional Guide to International Conflicts*, 150.
- 35 On false optimism see Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 14-35.
- 36 Rose, *How Wars End*, 263.
- 37 Donald Rumsfeld. Beyond Nation Building. February 14, 2003, Available at: www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=337.
- 38 See Table I in the appendix.
- 39 Before the invasion of Iraq there were many analyses suggesting that ousting Saddam Hussein would force the U.S. to face the problems of

state-building and transformation of Iraq. For example, Kenneth Pollack opting for invasion warned that “the biggest headaches for the United States are likely to stem not from the invasion itself but from its aftermath.” See Kenneth Pollack. Next Stop Baghdad? *Foreign Affairs* 81, No. 2 (March/April 2002), p. 45; see also: Rachel Bronson. When Soldiers Become Cops. *Foreign Affairs* 81, No. 6 (November/October 2002); Daniel Byman, “Constructing Democratic Iraq”, *International Security* 28, no.1 (Summer 2003).

- 40 See Table 2 in the appendix.
- 41 Sarkees and Wayman, *Resort to War*, 455.
- 42 Paul, Clarke and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, 96.
- 43 Clausewitz, 577.

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