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Great Powers, Small Wars

Deriglazova, Larisa

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CONCLUSION

Analyzing Asymmetric Conflicts Using the Model

This book has defined asymmetric conflict as a struggle between belligerents vastly incommensurate in force strength and resources. In a general sense, asymmetric conflict has been known and reported since antiquity. In the modern era, following the convulsions of two world wars in the twentieth century, it has become a more acutely observed phenomenon. The political background is the restraint shown by modern titans in waging “big wars” against each other, taking their antagonisms instead into the realm of economic, cultural, and ideological competition. There remain, however, small wars, limited engagements that enmesh protagonists of different capabilities, and here the paradoxical outcome in the postwar era has often been the political defeat of the militarily superior party. This phenomenon has become so pronounced that it has drawn the scrutiny of researchers, and a theoretical model is coalescing that considers the interaction of multiple quantitative and qualitative factors as a means of characterizing such conflicts. From the theoretical discussion at the beginning of the book, followed by two detailed case studies of great powers caught in asymmetric warfare, we can draw certain conclusions about the elements of the asymmetric conflict model and their relative weight in specific cases. This short discussion first recapitulates the findings of the previous chapters, then suggests how they could be applied in future research.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, the term “asymmetric conflict” has become widely used, though often quite nonrigorously, to describe quantitative asymmetries in resources or qualitative asymmetries in struggle strategies and the status of antagonists; the US military in particular has understood asymmetric conflict in terms of differences in military power and capabilities. More generally, researchers have explored the concept of asymmetry in several instances from the post–World War II era: in the French defeat in Indochina, the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, the Israeli defeat in Lebanon, and the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan. As the concept has developed, researchers have moved beyond the basic quantitative and qualitative differences of belligerents to studying asymmetric strategies. Further efforts to develop the concept of asymmetric conflict have drawn on methods used in political analysis to identify correlations among a limited number of variables that represent the key characteristics of an armed conflict. Such variables usually condition each other’s expression, making it difficult to predict the outcomes of future conflicts.

Such a multifactor analysis of dynamic relations between unequal adversaries in armed conflicts was proposed in chapter 1 as a theoretical model. The factors in the analysis, particularly factors that could explain the paradoxical political defeat of a great power by a weaker challenger in an armed conflict, are of three kinds: (1) internal or endogenous factors, or those having to do with the domestic characteristics of the belligerent parties (including both quantifiable resources and political, economic, and moral characteristics); (2) international or exogenous factors, or those that are defined by external influences on the participants in an armed conflict or on the development of the conflict (such as a great power coming to the aid of a weaker party, or international opinion weighing negatively on the conduct of the stronger power); and (3) tactical and strategic factors, or the manner and method in which the struggle is carried out—guerrilla actions versus fixed fighting units, for example. How such parameters assort themselves and influence other factors in any given case is an enduring challenge in asymmetric conflict analysis.

Attempts to measure asymmetry, to characterize it rigorously, typically begin with an inventory of possible constituent features or manifestations of such a relationship in databases on war. However, database records often do not catch all of the relevant information, and the measurements may

be tricky. Simply establishing a casualty level sufficient to call a dispute an armed conflict has proved inconsistent over the years. Checking one database against another is laborious but occasionally must be done; the first two chapters of this book take advantage of multiple databases to more securely ground the theoretical arguments. A further salient use of multiple databases is to acquire more views of basic data and more angles, perhaps complementary ones, on the conflict of interest. To undertake a multifactor historical analysis using the asymmetric conflict model, researchers must construct and work with a matrix of relationships and possible correlations among variables, and developing a good data set is a crucial first step in beginning such a study.

To explore the asymmetric conflict model, this book uses the experiences of the two most powerful countries of the Western world: Great Britain during the dissolution of the empire and the United States after the Cold War. Both countries bore the burden of global influence, and both present themselves as liberal democracies striving to disseminate their political model around the world. Although their war experiences are different and stand in contrast to one another, certain parallels can be drawn, though history is not shy about revealing the irony of coincidences and contradictions. The United States welcomed and encouraged the dissolution of the British Empire, as the United States was the first colony to free itself from the imperial burden through armed struggle. The self-liquidation of the “global British policeman,” however, in part a result of Britain’s weakened state after World War II, forced the United States to actively expand its sphere of responsibility in world affairs in the 1950s and 1960s. During the Vietnam War, interestingly enough, British military experts advised their American colleagues on how to efficiently tackle guerrilla fighters.

The dissolution of the British Empire was largely historically predetermined. The reasons for the relatively swift and probably inevitable dissolution included the economic weakening of Britain during World War II and the consequent depletion of its human, material, and financial resources available to maintain order in its vast imperial territory. Official documents from that era show that Britain had to reduce its armed forces, limit its military presence overseas, and dilute the assistance it had previously provided to loyal forces in the colonies; it simply did not have sufficient resources to sustain the previous level of control.

Whether and to what degree each of the military campaigns in the colonies ended in political defeat for Britain is occasionally a matter of debate. However, it seems undeniable that the imperium ceased to exist long before the empire came to an official end. In fact, an important component in the defeat of the empire was the defeat of the idea of empire, and here the crucial actors bringing influence to bear on Britain were the United States, the Soviet Union, and continental China. Despite the sincere intent of the metropolis to pave the way for a gradual transition of its colonies to self-governance, the desire of local nationalist forces for immediate liberation from colonial bondage was insurmountable. The revolutionary ideology of China, combined with an anti-imperialist struggle against Japanese occupation, proved more attractive to Britain's colonies in Asia. Nor should the role of the Soviet Union be overlooked: for the first time in its short history, the world's new superpower demonstrated its military and moral power in a persistent struggle against fascist bloc countries, becoming in the course of these efforts an ally of the leading Western powers, and one of equal standing. The Soviet isolation ended and its ideology gained weight and gravitas, as reflected in the growing popularity of leftist and communist parties all over the world and in the Soviet Union's contribution to the postwar world structure.

Thus, the British Empire suffered a political defeat in its real struggle against three powers of the new world: the Soviet Union, the United States, and the national liberation movements in the colonies, which were united in their common intent to eradicate the colonial order completely. The Commonwealth of Nations format to which the British Empire transitioned failed to provide the same degree of control over the resources, politics, and economy of the former colonies that had existed in the times of the empire. Here I will mention that the term "neocolonialism," widely used in the Soviet literature, needs to be correctly interpreted. In accordance with Marxist logic, Soviet literature characterized the new relations between the former metropolis and its dependencies as another form of exploitation that benefited developed countries at the expense of the developing world. It is true that the former colonies were tied economically, financially, and often strategically to the former metropolis. However, to maintain the loyalty of its former colonies, the United Kingdom had to allocate substantial funds to its development policy. Today, there are debates

in the United Kingdom about the profitability of the colonial system as a whole, about whether the imperial holdings ensured economic growth and a high standard of living in the metropolis or whether, on the contrary, the system of imperial dominance was associated with too many problems. One of these problems is constantly in the news today: the United Kingdom faces many difficulties as a society accepting millions of immigrants from its former colonies, and some of these difficulties are so pervasive as to influence national elections.

Applying asymmetric conflict theory to analyze the reasons for the dissolution of the British Empire, a structural change that was accompanied by military actions in all of its dependent territories, shows that economic factors associated with the dying empire and the influence of anti-imperialist ideology were of great importance in the postwar period. For Britain, the best outcome of warfare in the colonies was a minimal political victory consisting of offering independence and not letting the country fall under the influence of a leftist ideology. A maximum political victory, which can be described as preservation of British control and the gradual transfer of power to local forces under the control of British authorities, was often abandoned for the sake of a lesser victory. (On a slightly different note, a lasting result of its experiences with small wars in the colonial empire is that Britain now tends to be rather reserved with respect to the kinds of military force it uses, and it maintains a relatively small army.)

The US war in Iraq confirms the applicability of the asymmetric conflict concept. After the end of the Cold War, American strategists used the term “asymmetric” in reference to the incommensurability of US power and that of its potential adversaries, and believed that the main threat to US security came from rogue states that might try to use weapons of mass destruction against the United States. In initiating a war on Saddam Hussein’s regime, which was a continuation of President George W. Bush’s “war on terror,” begun after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States sought to present its actions as a just war, in this way hoping to legitimize this and other “last resort” actions against international terrorist organizations in developed and developing countries. The military, economic, and financial might of the United States led many to believe that the superpower would make short work of a war against Saddam Hussein’s regime, with victory inevitable. This thinking was also supported by the

successful and swift war against Iraq in 1991. However, soon after the start of the Iraq War the international coalition forces faced strong resistance from local forces in Iraq. Attempts to create a new political order in Iraq only aggravated the tensions between different factions in the country, intensifying the struggle for power and resources and leading to full-scale civil war in 2005–2006. Paradoxically, the war on terror stimulated the rise of terrorist organizations in the region and the world, which now engage in conducting limited conflicts and guerrilla actions against the developed Western countries.

The United States launched the war in Iraq for the sake of the ideals of democracy and liberation, but the war had an opposite effect, strengthening the global image of the United States as a bully, an empire that exercises its right to the unilateral use of force. This image is far from the democratic ideals that the United States wanted to defend in Iraq. Reviewing its strategy in Iraq forced the United States to examine its experiences fighting in Vietnam against forces much poorer in military might and economic resources, as well as Britain's experiences with underpowered skirmishes in its own dominions. The new strategy that was developed in late 2006 and implemented in 2007 was oriented toward a scheduled withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. In the 2006 midterm congressional elections, the Democratic Party won a majority of seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and this political change of horses prepared the ground for a change of policy in Iraq. The victory of the Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama extended the political defeat of the Republican Party, the "party of war," and its representatives. However, the internal logic of asymmetric conflicts suggests it would be difficult to terminate such a war without an obvious political defeat of the superpower. Despite strong criticism of the war during the electoral campaign, the Obama administration became a prisoner of the situation, or more precisely a casualty of the asymmetric confrontation factors that dictated the *modus operandi*. The actual withdrawal of troops took place later than Obama had promised as a candidate and in strict accordance with decisions made during the Bush administration.

The Iraq War is without doubt an example of a US political defeat. None of the goals laid out for this war was achieved. Nor were the undeclared

war objectives, namely, establishing control over the oil-producing sector of Iraqi economy and creating a loyal regime in the strategic region, attained. To this day, Iraq has failed to reach its prewar level of oil production. Funds allocated from the US budget and by private investors to reconstruct the infrastructure in this sector of economy often did not reach their target. Instead, the oil sector infrastructure became a constant target of attacks by guerrilla fighters. Moreover, the system of corrupt private contractors and local authorities came into being and will be hard to remove; international statistics place Iraq among the world's most corrupt nations. Many American analysts find it hard to acknowledge the political defeat of the military campaign in Iraq, which they take as tantamount to acknowledging the victory of al-Qaeda and its ideologists, against whom the war was waged in the first place.

The factors in the British and US political defeats can be grouped as follows:

1. Economic factors

In addition to domestic financial difficulties, the dissolution of the British Empire was accompanied by the collapse of the sterling zone and the devaluation of the pound sterling and its replacement by the US dollar in the global market. In works by British economists and historians and in official documents of the period, the currency devaluation and its fall from a world standard are named as significant problems in the postwar history of the empire.

During the Vietnam War, the United States also faced an acute financial crisis, one that forced the Nixon administration to end convertibility between the US dollar and gold in 1971. Beginning in 1973, the dollar exchange rate became determined by market mechanisms. The Iraq War was the main reason for the US domestic debt reaching an almost record level of \$1.7 trillion in 2009. The war's expenses also contributed to an unprecedented economic crisis in the United States that started in 2008 (and indeed, became a global economic crisis). Because the US dollar is an important world currency, in 2008 the leading powers began discussions on the need to develop new principles for the global monetary system.

2. Domestic factors

There is an established view that postwar Britain's defense and foreign policies were upheld by a bipartisan consensus, and historical documents do suggest that both Conservative and Labour governments used careful and balanced actions to expand Britain's military presence abroad. For Britain, the front of struggle against leftist ideology shifted to Europe, where a significant share of its armed forces was deployed. Documents from that era show that the consensus was the result of a difficult economic situation in the country after the war, and that room for maneuver was strictly limited by available resources and a still vast zone of global responsibility. In this instance, what is widely regarded as thoughtful foreign policy really arose from domestic exigencies.

In the United States, domestic factors were manifested in the disagreement of the main parties over military policy. The Vietnam War came to an end as a result of pressure exerted by Congress and by war opponents in the United States. The Iraq War did not inspire the same level of opposition as the Vietnam War but did lead to the 2008 electoral defeat of the Republican Party, which had initiated the war. However, the process of war termination carried out by the Obama administration demonstrated that inertia of a political system can result in policy continuity despite declared party disagreements. In other words, squabbling parties that disagreed over foreign policy had much in common in the day-to-day functioning of real-politik and ended up pursuing a similar course, the chronologically second mover following the plans of the first mover.

3. International factors

The international factors that significantly conditioned the defeat of the British Empire included an anti-imperialist ideology, which was supported by the Soviet Union, the United States, and national liberation movements. The newly created international relations system reflected these ideas in UN charter documents, and then in the implementation of the regulations in the documents. International factors included US influence and the special form of the Anglo-American interaction, especially in their competition and disagreements in the areas of ideology, economy, finances, and politics. The Soviet influence was to a large extent indirect, exercised as it was through the emerging Eastern bloc in Europe and

expressed in anti-imperialist rhetoric and the support of national liberation movements.

The United States' failures in Iraq can also be explained by the influence of international factors. A negative attitude toward the war in many countries, especially in the Middle East, contributed to the collapse of the coalition of the willing and the rise of anti-American sentiments. Iraq became the place where international terrorist groups fought the United States. The pressure of global public opinion became a crucial factor in the change of policies in Iraq and helped place the United States on a trajectory to end the war.

Another important factor that influenced the outcome of asymmetric conflicts in the post-World War II period was the strengthening of norm- and value-oriented approaches in international politics, in conjunction with a tighter linkage between national and international politics. The concepts of justice and legitimacy were for a long time associated with the system of norms inherent to a closed social system, but later they became the foundation of international politics. Democratic values and principles became foundational to the postwar system of international relations. Their gradual and consistent implementation tore the veil from the contradictions in the norms, principles, declared values, and real conditions dividing very diverse actors that are still united under the world system of international relations.

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Thus, the asymmetric conflict phenomenon to a large extent refutes established perceptions about the consequences of power domination in armed conflicts between unequal adversaries, rather than determining the winner and loser. Secondly, this phenomenon confirms the presence of stable interconnections between participants in international relations, a tight linkage between domestic and foreign policy, and a hierarchy of military and political domains of contemporary states.

Asymmetric conflict is a crucial part of past and present international relations, and an appropriate analytical model helps us better understand such conflicts. To apply asymmetric conflict theory, it is first necessary to formulate a complex matrix of possible variables whose weight in the model and impact on the outcome of the conflict are difficult to predict.

Nonetheless, the model can be usefully applied, provided that certain conditions are observed. As a historical analysis of asymmetric conflicts demonstrates, the asymmetric conflict phenomenon finds expression in the interconnection of multiple variables. It is virtually impossible to identify any single factor whose presence would guarantee a manifestation of the phenomenon. The asymmetric conflict phenomenon is an equation with many unknowns, rather than a strict matrix of dependencies and determinants.

The asymmetric conflict model proposed in this book is one that can be used in applied analysis; it is not a theory establishing any rigid correlation of variables. However, relying on this model, one can develop and apply the concept so long as it is understood as an aggregate of asymmetric characteristics of an armed conflict that follow the basic asymmetry in power, resources, and status. The weaker party to a conflict will always attempt to change the balance of power and relations within the system in order to expand its authority, increase its resources, and elevate its status. This should be taken into account when analyzing specific examples of armed conflicts between asymmetric antagonists to better understand the logic of the struggle and predict the outcome. The asymmetric conflict phenomenon emerged from a historical analysis of completed wars, and is of interest for historical research. In political and strategic analysis, the model and the concept of asymmetric conflict can be used instead to make assumptions about, and prepare for, possible paradoxical developments that run counter to expectations based solely on the military and resource dominance of one of the parties.