# Obstacles to enduring peace in asymmetric conflicts: a U.S. perspective

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Since the end of the Second World War, wars between state and substate actors have more and more often fallen into the category of "asymmetric" war: war between two actors or groups of actors characterized by a large gap in material power relative to each other. In theory, wars of this type should be rare, because if power implies victory, then since one actor – let's call it "Goliath" – dramatically out-powers another actor – let's call it "David" – David should give in to Goliath's demands without the bother of actually fighting, since the outcome – defeat for David – is known in advance. In reality, however, both the frequency of such wars as a proportion of the total, and victories by Davids have risen over time:

Figure 1: Asymmetric conflict victories over time, 1816–1999
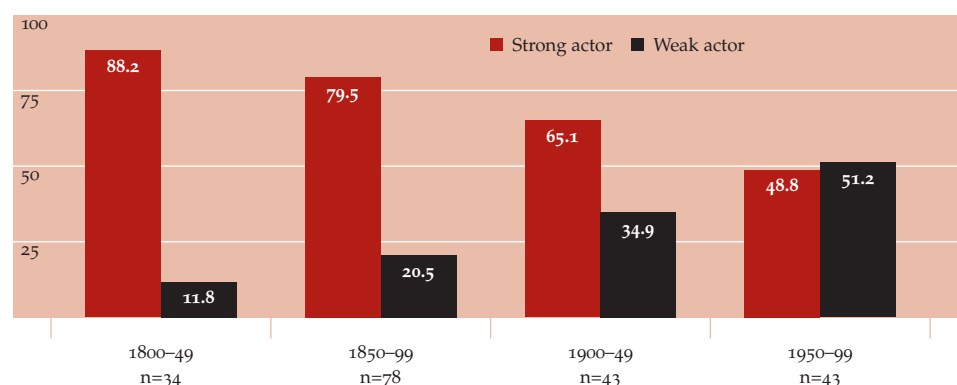
Keeping in mind that 'Goliaths' out-power 'Davids' in this graphic by a ratio of at least ten to one, and that the power metric – in this case, I used a fairly simple proxy of population and armed forces – is kept constant over time, either something is clearly causing such "power" to be less effective at causing victory in war over time; or our understanding of what victory means has changed. The real-world "Davids" include states, but nowadays are mainly substate actors such as insurgents and, terrorists (an important subset of insurgents who target non-

combatants for political purposes). I have explored the cause of declining Goliath victories over time elsewhere.[2] For our purposes it is enough to note that both OECD countries[3] and current political elites in countries where many OECD states once maintained a colonial presence, are aware that material and techno-logical power no longer correlate with quick and easy victories in what is now most often called the "developing world."

Dilemmas of intervention

In the United States this view was most famously expressed by Colin Powell who, in an influential 1992 essay entitled "U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead," advocated a general U.S. foreign policy of non-intervention.[4] Powell argued that the use of force in peacekeeping, humanitarian, drug-interdiction, and civil-war termination roles was invariably risky and likely to prove counterproductive; most particularly since he and his cohort in the Pentagon had devoted years of effort to restructur-ing U.S. armed forces so as to make it difficult for a U.S. president to commit U.S. armed forces to operations that were not obviously of vital national interest.

The chief problem with Powell's prescription was that it ran afoul of two power-ful counter arguments. First, neither United States nor its allies could afford to sit idly by while substate actors engaged in mass murder, rape, and deportation; or while failing states succumbed to control by organized criminal and terrorist gangs. True, independent of humanitarian concerns these horrors did not directly engage vital U.S. security or economic interests, but a case could be (and was) made for them indirectly affecting U.S. interests. Second, Powell's prescription – only other states and only when directly threatened – ran counter to the general perception in the United States that due to the collapse of the Soviet Union the United States had come into a position of overwhelming relative power. Many felt (some more strongly than others) that such power must be justified by right action, and such action should include humanitarian interventions.

The problem from the point of view of the U.S. military – it is less true of many Euro-pean militaries today – is that U.S. armed forces had been specifically designed to fight and win wars against other states. The technology, training, and doctrine that the U.S. military adopted in order to make it unrivalled in interstate conflict has made it vulnerable in substate engagements. General Powell was only one of many in the United States who recognized that the use of U.S. armed forces in substate contexts, regardless of the nominal balance of forces, would most often lead to disaster.

Culture as a constraint?

A final problem affects the United States in its efforts to balance threats to its identity as 'opponent of mass rape, murder, and deportation' with the feasibility of military interventions. This is a cultural predisposition to confuse the use of U.S. armed forces (or violence more broadly) with policy effectiveness. This leads to the costly and generally counterproductive habit of tasking the U.S. Department of

Defence to be the first response to threats such as terrorism and narco-trafficking – neither of which constitute direct or intense threats.[5] Since the end of the Second World War, for example, Americans have been remarkably consistent in their support for "faux wars" – wars on poverty (1960s), drugs (1980s and 90s), and now terror (2001 and on) – a good indication that a broad segment of U.S. public opinion associates organized violence with effectiveness. In the war on poverty, the U.S. military was not involved. In the war on drugs, it was marginally involved, and in the war on terror it has been heavily involved.

This trend toward increasing engagement of the U.S. military in essentially non-military problems is easier to understand by imagining two broad strategies or approaches to solving difficult social and political problems: demand-side and supply-side. Supply-side strategies focus on solving problems by means of reducing or eliminating the supply of the identified cause of the problem. Demand-side strategies focus on identifying who wants a thing and why, and then solving problems by means of providing some of the wanted thing. On nearly any dimension (e.g. gun control, immigration, campaign finance reform, counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency), the U.S. public has historically debated or preferred a supply-side approach. Addressing the demand for these unhappy things is hardly given much thought, and is apt to be repudiated rather than rewarded politically. This is why U.S. public opinion has traditionally not supported negotiations with terrorists. Because "terrorists" are by definition "weak" actors in an asymmetric conflict, as well as actors who deliberately target noncombatants, most people count them as irrational or evil. If substate actors are either irrational or evil, it follows that one cannot bargain with them, so talking is pointless (or at least a political liability). Supply-side strategies obviate the need for deep understanding of other cultures or histories, or the tiresome labour of discovering who is driving demand and why. They promise less ambiguous measures of success, and above all they promise to deliver positive results quickly.

In this context it is easier to see that in its excessively militarized response to the terror attacks of 9/11, the Bush (W.) administration was merely capitalizing on a broad and pre-existing base of political support for tasking the U.S. military with "negotiations." Unfortunately and by design, the U.S. military's chief negotiation tactic is to attempt to find and kill "bad guys." In isolation from a broader and more long-term strategy – and these are as much questions of leadership as of culture – such "wars" can never be won.

What we are left with in the U.S. case is a classic dilemma; one aptly characterized by Richard Falk as "non-intervention is intolerable, but [military] intervention becomes impossible."[6] Of course, not all countries supporting a process of negotiation or mediation to halt substate violence face the same dilemmas to the same extent.

Public support for negotiations: private or public?

In seeking to understand what determines public support for negotiations to halt substate violence, every state's public is different but in general two things matter

most: (1) the structure; and (2) the history of the conflict. In terms of structure, it matters whether we are talking about a fight between a government and a substate group seeking to harm that government by means of violence; or a government's efforts to halt a fight between two distant combatants. Although U.S. and British publics, for example, have tended to support political leaders who opposed public negotiations with terrorists who targeted Americans or Britons, they have generally supported their respective governments' efforts to mediate others' disputes, even when one or both actors in that distant conflict have targeted noncombatants during their fight. Thus in one sort of conflict, private negotiations are the best option, while in another, both public and private negotiations (or mediation) are likely to find support.

In terms of history, we should expect public support for negotiations to be higher – and government interest therefore greater – in conflicts that have lasted a long time without resolution; especially those in which a supply-side (kill bad guys first) strategy has been implemented for years without tangibly advancing prospects for peace. Conflicts in Nepal, Palestine, and Northern Ireland may serve as good examples here. A history of success may help as well: publics are more apt to support a government's negotiation efforts if it has succeeded in past negotiations.

Negotiation and bargaining in asymmetric conflicts

Given the increasing failure of military interventions to resolve or deter substate based violence since the Second World War (and particularly after the Cold War), an emphasis on skilful diplomacy – including mediation and negotiated settlements – would appear to be an ideal alternative. But there are a number of problems with negotiated settlements, especially since the end of the Second World War.

First, recent research on the specific question of the value of negotiated settlements to end civil wars has resulted in some surprising findings. The first and most important is that since 1940, of the three ways civil wars can end – negotiations, outright military victory, and stalemate or ceasefire – negotiated settlements have proven the least stable: they're three times more likely to recur than wars ended by military victory.[7] Thus, if the effectiveness of military intervention has declined over time, so has the effectiveness of negotiated settlements in achieving lasting peace.

Second, when we look at why negotiated settlements have failed we find that one common cause of failure is associated with a non-violence bias that has over time crept into the terms of most settlements. Prior to the Second World War, negotiated settlements axiomatically included both carrots (positive incentives) and sticks (negative incentives). During the Cold War, however, the "sticks" component became a problem because military interventions might escalate to a confrontation between the superpowers. This in turn might escalate to all-out and nuclear war. More importantly, such interventions as did take place often met with unexpected results, in which (as noted above) expected winners lost. Both trends damaged the utility and hence credibility of the sticks component of negotiated settlements. If true, over time negotiators will have been left with only two sorts of carrots to

offer as a way to dissuade violence: the diffused benefit of "peace" (defined as non-violence), and the promise of some specific economic benefits. Again, we are not talking about success at cease-fires. We are talking about an agreement that achieves peace for at least ten to twenty years.

A subsidiary problem with increased reliance on carrots alone to demobilize armed violence emerges as well: even if both sides in a two-party dispute agree to cease violence pending the receipt of some economic benefit, without a credible security guarantee from a third party, post-war chaos may make the distribution of promised aid difficult or impossible. This is one way to describe the failed humanitarian relief effort in Somalia following the collapse of that state into virtual anarchy after the toppling of Siad Barre in 1991. After civil-war-induced famine swept through Somalia, belligerents agreed to a cease-fire and to a UN-led distribution of desperately needed food aid. The fact of the cease-fire and the obvious need led those advocating the mission to believe that only a minimal armed presence might be necessary. Yet once food aid arrived the belligerents came to view the food aid as a strategic resource, and all belligerents rapidly came to the same conclusion: the costs and risks of hijacking food aid were low as compared to the potential benefits of starving rivals. Suddenly, the poorly-armed forces previously sent to Somalia were overwhelmed, and this left donor countries with a difficult decision: (1) escalate the armed force presence, securing food aid and deterring future attempts to use that aid as a weapon, or (2) abandon Somalia to yet more violence and anarchy. In the event, the first option was chosen, and the deaths of eighteen U.S. special forces soldiers in the "battle of Mogadishu" (October 1993) led to a U.S. pull-out. Once it became clear that it would be impossible to distribute food aid without a major military presence, and that most OECD publics would not support such a presence, the aid program collapsed, much to the detriment of the Somali people.

A third problem surrounds the question of the issue over which belligerents are fighting. Broadly speaking, these may be thought of as either "goodies" or identity issues. Identity issues are notoriously difficult to negotiate because once an issue gets framed in this way belligerents are loathe to compromise, even when doing so can be demonstrated to be better for them than a resort to arms, or the continuation of a violent conflict already under way. Belligerents may agree to a cease-fire for the sole purpose of attempting to gain more arms, cash, or fighters later. On the other hand, fights over goodies ideally present wonderful prospects for economic incentives to de-escalate a conflict except in those countries where a concentration of wealth is precisely what is being fought over. Diamonds, gold, and petroleum are but three examples of resources whose possession may be the aim of belligerent violence,[8] and in such cases the leverage of promised economic support may be zero. Conflicts in Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, for example, present fewer opportunities for negotiations to succeed long term because belligerents understand that (a) no third party with sufficient military capability to intervene will be willing to do so; and (b) the economic value of exclusive control of the country's natural resources reduces the potential benefit of any offer of post-conflict economic aid. One possible way out of this impasse is for interested third parties

to organize an embargo of the specific resource in question, so as to starve belligerents of the cash they need to continue the violence, and to create an incentive to seek reconstruction aid once violence has ceased. However this in itself is tricky, because valuable resources have historically often found ways of eluding such controls and restrictions. Moreover, even if an embargo were successful, we would still be left in a position I've sketched above, which is the promise of economic aid (benefit) without a credible threat to harm defectors.

Overall, given the need for intervention to halt substate violence, the problem of disappearing sticks in negotiated settlements (with the result that negotiated settlements are the preferred way to end or deter substate violence but are at the same time ineffective at causing lasting peace,) what is the best way to halt and deter contemporary substate violence?

Conclusions

One obvious solution to the problem of endemic substate violence must be avoided: a general policy of standing idly by while substate actors hack away at each other to the lasting detriment of most of the developing world's people. Non-intervention is intolerable, both for moral reasons, and for the practical reason that standing idly by simply delays, but cannot prevent, the eventual arrival upon the shores of the developed world of a real disaster; whether this be in the form of a terrorist attack, a plague, or of rising sea levels due to environmental globalization.

The real difficulty with engineering long-term peace settlements is that there may be no technical solution to the larger conditions that drive substate violence. When one looks at the requirements of halting violence and then reconstructing a war-torn state, they come to look not only costly in terms of security presence and economic expenditure, but very much like colonialism. What are we to do if "failed states" are in fact not failed, so much as returning to a status quo before colonialism, where rival substate political elites fought over status and goodies rather than identity, ideology, or abstract state boundaries? Putting the question this way reminds us that the "state," as a form of political association, was a European invention. It was exported by merchants, priests, and soldiers, most often by violent means.

If my analysis is correct, then in order to halt and deter substate violence without returning to colonialism we will collectively need to undertake two sorts of initiatives. First, we'll need to reintroduce the threat of destruction and violence (sticks) into the negotiation process. If, as Charles Tilly once so famously asserted, "war made the state and the state made war," then reversing state failure will require reintroducing the political elites who reside in failing states to the fear of destruction from other states. That threat of destruction will create demand for public service, and public service (as opposed to rival gangs seeking goodies) is necessary if states are to succeed as such. To make that threat credible will require OECD states – those most likely to have the capability to intervene effectively across long distances – to re-engineer their militaries in ways that make them more effective

in substate conflicts. This in itself may prove more challenging for some countries – e.g. the United States – than others, but it must be done if the threat of military intervention to punish settlement defectors is to be made credible. Second, we'll need to educate our respective publics – some more than others – on the limits of force and on the requirements of successful intervention. Successful interventions take time – up to ten years of special military assistance and up to twenty of efficiently distributed reconstruction aid may be generally necessary to rehabilitate a war-torn state and ensure a lasting and fair peace.

Prior to the London Underground bombings of July 2005, one might have argued that due to their longer and more extensive colonial histories, and longer and more direct experience with terrorism, European publics might have been expected to exercise more restraint in the aftermath of a major terrorist attack. Yet British public reaction to the bombings proved remarkably similar to that of the U.S. public following the 9/11 attacks. The implication is clear: enduring peace requires discriminate violence (sticks), economic assistance, and an enduring commitment from donor countries. That in turn requires enlightened leadership combined with sustained education of OECD publics both on the benefits of intervention (including mediation and negotiation), and on the costs (especially in terms of time) of effective action. ■

Endnotes

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2   Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

3   I use the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member states category to represent actors most likely to possess both the interest (they are most likely to benefit from the status quo in terms of security and trade) and capability to intervene militarily in the affairs of other states, even though non-members have on occasion supported both interventions and negotiations to halt substate violence.

4   Colin L. Powell, "U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 75, No. 5 (1992/93), pp. 32–51.

5   The terror attacks of 11 September 2001, for example, took the lives of an estimated three thousand people. This is the equivalent of about one-twentieth of annual U.S. traffic fatalities, or about one-twentieth the number of British soldiers who died in a single afternoon in July 1916. Terrorism hurts, but its costs should be kept in context. Even terrorism with chemical and nuclear weapons may not rise to the level of threat of major interstate war (though biological terrorism might).

6   Richard N. Falk, "Hard Choices and Tragic Dilemmas," *The Nation,* Vol. 257, No. 21 (1993), p. 757.

7   Monica Duffy Toft, "Peace Through Security: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars," unpublished manuscript, 2007.

8   Paul Collier, "The Market for Civil War," *Foreign Policy,* No. 136 (May 2003), pp. 40–45.