

WHY DO BIG STATES LOSE SMALL WARS?

POR QUE GRANDES ESTADOS PERDEM PEQUENAS GUERRAS?

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RESUMO

Essa análise investiga o fenômeno das pequenas guerras, particularmente a derrota de um estado mais forte por um oponente mais fraco e as consequências para a teoria da guerra. Em primeiro lugar, ele segue a teoria que embasa a eficiência de pequenos participantes, destacando a importância da guerra irregular. Em segundo lugar, ele cita as teorias que tentam explicar o fracasso de participantes fortes em conflitos, tais como: a assimetria de interesses, a abordagem estratégica, a mecanização e a democratização da guerra. Em terceiro lugar, dois casos clássicos foram selecionados para análise, a guerra do Vietnã (1963-1975) e a intervenção soviética no Afeganistão (1979-1989). No primeiro caso, obviamente, a grande potência envolvida era um Estado democrático, e no último, um Estado autoritário. Finalmente, será possível traçar um quadro geral sobre 'por que grandes Estados perdem pequenas guerras'.

Palavras-chave: Pequenas guerras. Guerra assimétrica. Política externa.

ABSTRACT

This analysis investigates the phenomenon of small wars, particularly the defeat of a state with a strong power by a weaker opponent and consequences for the war theory. Firstly, it addresses the theoretical approach that supports the efficiency of small participants, highlighting the importance of irregular warfare. Secondly, it addresses the theories which try to explain the failure of strong participants in conflicts, such as: the interest asymmetry, the strategic approach, the mechanization and the democratization of war. Thirdly, two classic cases have been selected for analysis, the Vietnam war (1963-1975) and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989). In the first case, of course, the major power involved was a democratic state, and in the latter an authoritarian one. Finally, it will be possible to draw a general picture of 'why big states lose small wars'.

Keywords: Small Wars. Asymmetric Warfare. Foreign Policy.

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I INTRODUCTION

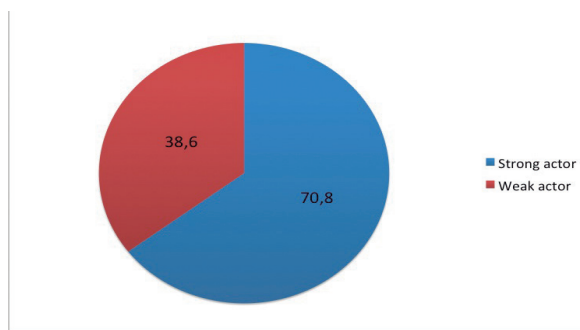
The famous images from 1975 of helicopters lifting people from the rooftop of the American Embassy in Saigon recorded the defeat of a superpower by a weaker opponent. They are scenes that will never be forgotten either by Vietnamese or Americans (UNITED..., 1975).

However, the phenomenon of big states failing in wars against weaker opponents is not new: in fact, history shows several cases in which powerful states have lost limited wars, such as Teutoburg Forest (9 AD); the Dutch wars in Brazil (1624-1654); the American War of Independence (1773-1783); the independence struggles in Angola (1961-1974), Indochina (1946-1954) and Algeria (1954-1962); and the Soviets in Afghanistan (1979-1989). Differences between combatant powers in terms of their military capability, level of technology and economic power are among the factors affecting their respective chances of achieving victory. Such differences can be considered forms of asymmetry (COSTA, 2004, p. 64), and conflicts in this sense are always bound to be asymmetrical because enemies never have precisely the same resources. A glance at the theory of war and strategy reinforces the perception that the ability to exploit strategic differences (asymmetry) tends to lead to victory (METZ, 2002, p. 22-31).

The term 'small wars' was first used by the United States Marine Corps in 1940 to identify operations against insurgencies and civil conflicts arising from political, economic and social problems (UNITED..., 2010). It has been used mostly in an academic context, but not always with the same meaning. Mack (1975, p. 175-200) uses 'small wars' to mean a type of 'asymmetric conflict', referring to a strong military power fighting either a much weaker state or domestic insurgents.

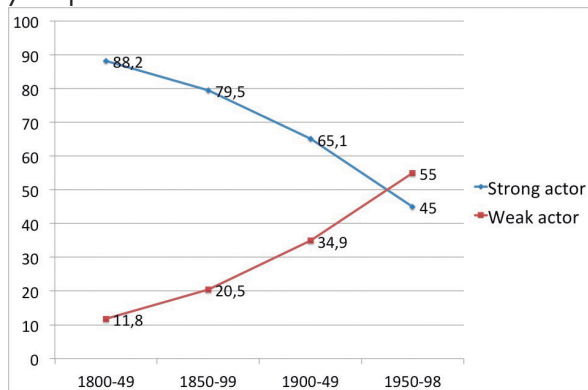
Historically, the victory rate of big states when they go to war is highest when they have an advantage in terms of asymmetric power of at least 5:1; between 1800 and 1998 they won 70.8% of these asymmetric conflicts (Figure 1). It is striking, however, that from 1950 onwards weak powers had much greater success in asymmetric conflicts as a whole (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Victories in Asymmetric Conflict (%), 1800-1998.



Source: Arreguin-Toft, 2001, p.97.

Figure 2: Victories in Asymmetric Conflict (%), each fifty years period.



Source: Arreguin-Toft, 2001, p.97.

This analysis aims at investigating why big states lose small wars. In so doing, three possibilities may be raised:

- Weak actors are more efficient in the use of ends, ways and means;
- Big states fail to employ ends, means and ways properly; and
- There is some other intervening variable that weighs in favour of the weaker side.

These possibilities will be developed as follows: first, theoretical concepts about how weak actors fighting against strong actors will be introduced; second, the indicators of failure of strong actors will be addressed; and third, two historical cases in which powerful states were defeated will be addressed, with an analysis of the intervening variables that worked in favour of their weaker adversaries.

The Vietnam war and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, two classic cases, have been selected for analysis; in the former case, of course, the major power involved was a democratic state, and in the latter an authoritarian one.

2 THE EFFICIENCY OF THE WEAKER ACTOR

The efficiency of weak actors fighting against strong opponents is closely linked to their fighting style. Lyall and Wilson (2009, p. 67-106) note that the performance of the weak actors improved considerably in the twentieth century with the greater use of irregular warfare, hence the importance of identifying the concepts of this kind of war.

a. The science of guerrilla warfare

Writing about his experiences in the Arab Revolt (1916-1918) against Turkey, Thomas E. Lawrence (2008, p. 244-251), better known as 'Lawrence of Arabia', shows that the weaker side cannot take on their opponent face to face, as in the Clausewitz paradigm, simply because they do not have enough means to fight an 'absolute war'. However, irregular forces might be able to maintain the initiative by attacking the enemy's most vulnerable points, pinning him down by forcing him to defend several different positions.

Lawrence highlights the strategic importance, in the Arab Revolt, of the weaker side having the support of the local population, and with it the offer of safe havens. He argues that the irregular war provides an appropriate environment for decentralized actions that oblige the combatant to show enthusiasm, endurance and initiative, concluding that 'guerrilla war is far more intellectual than a bayonet charge' (LAWRENCE, 2008, p. 250) and that 'the war might be won without fighting battles' (LAWRENCE, 2008, p. 251).

b. People's warfare

Mao Tse-Tung developed the theory of People's War during the Chinese Civil Wars (1927-1949), making use of his practical experience. His concept is based on two principles: avoiding direct confrontation with the enemy; and acquiring people's support to achieve victory. The strategy of Mao was popularly summarised thus: "the enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue" (HAMMES, 2004, p. 46).

He established rules of conduct for contact between the Red Army and the civilian population, so as to help earn the latter's goodwill. Popular support was seen as essential for intelligence and logistical purposes, and for the recruitment of guerrilla fighters. Mao's concise analogy captures this perspective: 'the guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea' (HOLMES, 2001, p. 545-546).

Mao's view was that irregular forces are a tool to be used during the campaign, but that they need to develop into a conventional force in order to secure ultimate victory. This process was seen to require three stages: the first, 'Strategic Defensive', a guerrilla stage

when the focus is on the recruitment and training of guerrilla fighters, also seeks the people's trust – in this phase the irregular forces must be flexible, with the ability to scatter among the people and then to regroup, focusing on specific goals; second, 'Stalemate', in which the irregular forces are by now capable of conducting a war of attrition but are not yet strong enough to achieve outright victory; and third, 'Strategic Offensive', when irregular and conventional forces are used to destroy the enemy (KIRAS, 2007, p. 164-191).

When Mao wrote 'On Protracted War' he knew guerrillas had existed for centuries so he didn't consider himself the creator of a new form of warfare. Nevertheless, his victory in the Chinese Civil War and his theoretical approach came to be 'disseminated as a form of warfare capable of defeating much more powerful enemies' (HAMMES, 2004, p. 53).

c. The Evolution of People's Warfare – Revolutionary Warfare

People's War was also waged by Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap to defeat the French in Indochina, with Dien Bien Phu (November 1953 - May 1954) the climax in the application of Mao's theory. They believed revolutionary warfare was a continuation by arms of the political, social, cultural and economic struggle against the colonial powers, and their theory emphasizes the importance of time and space in order to achieve political goals.

Giap summarized the principles of indirect warfare thus:

Is the enemy strong? One avoids him. Is he weak? One attacks him. To his modern equipment, one opposes a boundless heroism to vanquish either by harassing or by combining military operations with political and economic action; there is no fixed line of demarcation, the front being wherever the enemy is found (ALEXANDER, 1998).

However, some modifications of the strategy were necessary during the Vietnam War; Giap planned a war of attrition and conducted a strong domestic and foreign propaganda campaign in order to break American resolve (HAMMES, 2008, p. 29-30). This classic case will be covered in more details below.

The civil war in Nicaragua (1961-1990) saw a refinement of Mao's strategy; the Sandinistas actions showed that a final offensive using conventional forces is not always necessary. They had organized a 'correlation of forces' which brought about the collapse of the Somoza government, then they occupied the subsequent power vacuum (HAMMES, 2008, p. 30-32).

The Brazilian Carlos Marighella (1969) wrote in his 'Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla' that illegal actions

and terrorism are necessary in order to provoke the ruling powers into acts of great violence which would mean they lost legality and legitimacy, and consequently lost popular support (KIRAS, 2007, p. 190-194).

The theory of revolutionary movements has, of course, been elaborated through many other notable contributions, such as those by Che Guevara and Debray, and has never ceased to evolve, thereby confirming Clausewitz's assertion that 'war is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case' (SMITH, 2005, p. 28).

3 THE FAILURE OF THE STRONG

In general, the theories that try to explain strong actors' failures in conflicts are based on strategic variables (ends, ways and means) or on specific events that influence the war (another variable). This chapter analyses some of these theories: interest asymmetry (ends), strategic approach (ways), mechanization (means) and the democratization of war (another variable).

a. Interest Asymmetry Theory

The pioneering explanation offered by Andrew Mack (1975, p. 175-200) includes the idea that the strong power's motivation to prevail in 'small wars' is lowered by the fact that their survival is not at stake; for the weaker actor, however, victory is their only means to survive. This asymmetry of interests is a political liability for the strong, but not for the weak.

Long drawn-out wars with negative outcomes on the battlefield reduce the willingness of the public (in democratic countries) or the political elite (authoritarian countries) to continue, making it more likely that the troops will be withdrawn. Mack uses the Algerian War as an example to argue that the stronger actor focuses on the military outcome and the weaker on the political outcome. General Massu's barbaric methods won the battle, but the use of torture heightened public opposition in France while boosting nationalism and cohesion in Algeria (MACK, 1975, p. 180-181).

Mack therefore recognizes the importance of 'unconventional forms of warfare – guerrilla war, urban terrorism, or even non-violent action' (MACK, 1975, p.195) in 'small wars' of colonial conquest. His theory does not encompass all the reasons why stronger nations can be defeated, but provides a good starting point.

b. Strategic Interaction Theory

Arreguin-Toft (2001, p. 93-128) developed a theory in which the strategic approach is the most important determinant of the outcome in conflicts between strong and weak actors. He argues that, in general, the strong actor uses offensive strategy and the weak actor defensive. The strong actor may employ direct attack and barbarism, while the weak actor may

use direct defence and guerrilla warfare.

Direct attack and direct defence are concepts from conventional warfare, while barbarism and guerrilla war are from irregular warfare. The guerrilla uses Mao's theory; and 'barbarism' refers to the 'systematic violation of laws in pursuit of a military or a political objective' (ARREGUIN-TOFT, 2001, p. 101). Through barbarism the stronger power tries to break their opponent's will and their capacity to fight, employing human rights violations against combatants and non-combatants (e.g. torture, executions) and even, in some cases, using prohibited weapons (e.g. biological and chemical agents).

Arreguin-Toft says that when the stronger and weaker power employ symmetrical approaches – which is to say the stronger power employs direct attack against direct defence, or barbarism against guerrilla war – the stronger power was victorious in 76% of cases. However, in the opposite scenarios, when the stronger power used direct attack against guerrilla warfare, or barbarism against direct defence, it was the weaker power that prevailed in 63% of cases (ARREGUIN-TOFT, 2001, p. 112). He concludes that 'strong actors lose asymmetric conflicts when they adopt the wrong strategy vis-à-vis their weaker adversaries' (ARREGUIN-TOFT, 2001, p. 121).

Arreguin-Toft's analysis is relevant, but in addition to his statistical data it is important to make qualitative considerations. First, if the weaker combatant wants to be successful he should use an indirect strategy, combined with domestic and international support. Second, although barbarism might yield results as a military strategy, it produces political vulnerability, particularly in longer-term actions.

Some examples are classic: Georgia used direct defence against Russia's direct attack in 2008, the symmetric approach giving quick victory to the stronger invader (Pallin; Westerlung, 2009, p. 400-424); France won the Battle of Algiers (1957) through barbarism, but ultimately it reinforced popular resistance; Gaddafi's barbarism in the Libyan civil war (2011) secured tactical victories but also provoked the UN Security Council resolution which ultimately led to regime change (BARRY, 2011, p. 5-14).

Another point is that barbarism is not the only option for combating guerrillas; irregular warfare presents other alternatives in counterinsurgency operations (COIN), for example the use of Special Forces. However, in general, irregular warfare is also characterized by centralized planning and decentralized execution, necessitating a high degree of control and a long-term commitment.

c. Mechanization Theory

Lyall and Wilson argue that during the recent history of wars that can be characterised as insurgencies, the insurgents have been achieving increased success. They developed the theory that mechanization is actually responsible for reducing the success of states that wage

counterinsurgency wars. Their assumptions are that regular troops tend to privilege military means, focusing on combat itself, while guerrillas prefer to influence the local population; that the guerrilla does not need to employ technology or achieve quick outcomes; and that information-gathering is the main element in COIN.

According to Lyall and Wilson, regular armed forces with high levels of technology and mechanization replace men with machines or technology and use specific logistical support, outside the operational area – a negative consequence of which is that they lose the 'foraging' skills which had allowed them to obtain supplies within the operational areas. This reduces the degree of direct interaction with the local population, and consequently the amount of information and degree of understanding about local aspirations – which puts them in disadvantage against irregular forces. They use examples of two US divisions deployed in Iraq (2003-2004) to support their theory.

Lyall and Wilson's (2009, p. 67-106) quantitative analysis may be contested by qualitative arguments. Success in COIN depends on the correct use of means: for example infantry is more appropriate for COIN whereas an armoured division, with high firepower and mobility, is suited to regular warfare. Nowadays, the purchase of supplies outside the combat zone is important in order to preserve resources for the local population, and yet 'foraging' remains part of modern military doctrine regardless of the level of mechanization of the army.

However, the most significant aspect of their research is in identifying the positive impact on the insurgents' outcomes when: first, insurgents have external support; and second, regular forces are operating far from their homeland and do not speak the local language. Importantly they also established that, since 1945, democratic states have tended to have worse outcomes than authoritarian states in practising COIN.

d. Democratization of War Theory

The concept of the democratization of war (DOW) (LEVY, 2010, p. 787) involves the limitations democratic states face in their management of war, given the importance of public opinion and elections. In DOW there is political control over military matters, which constrains the scope of military campaigns and reduces the sacrifices societies are prepared to make.

This place limits on the kind of war democratic states are able to wage, with a pressure towards short campaigns and the minimization of casualties. 'Operation Desert Storm' (1991), with only a hundred hours of boots on the ground, and the seven months of airpower intervention in Libya (2011) are examples of this new style. Levy (2010, p. 786-803) contends that when the costs of war increase, government (civilian politicians) with little military experience are more susceptible to public pressure; examples include the American decision to withdraw from Iraq in 2011 and their intention to leave

Afghanistan in 2014. Levy argues that the Second Lebanon War (2006) was a classic example of DOW reducing the freedom of action of a state – Israel – and its ability to control the hostilities.

Indeed, the DOW factor makes it easier for the weaker combatant to achieve their political objective through a protracted war of attrition – particularly if the war is taking place far from the stronger combatant's homeland and if the stronger combatant's survival is not at stake. Democratic states would therefore be more likely to lose “small wars” than authoritarian states.

4 THE VIETNAM WAR (1963-1975)

The historiography of the Vietnam Conflict is wide and rich as it was the first televised conflict, where the media played a very important role. Why did the United States win the main battles but lost the war? (SUMMERS, 1995, p. 1-7)

The United States sent troops to prop up the South Vietnamese regime and contain the communist threat during the Cold War. An analysis of numbers (deployments and losses) points to a relative success for the Americans (SILVA, 2004, p. 409-412), but in viewing the mounting losses of the Vietcong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA)² they were mistaken in assuming a war of attrition would exhaust the enemy and force them to give up. In fact, Ho Chi Minh, Giap and other leaders were ready to lose ten soldiers for every American, convinced that the U.S. population could not bear the burden of a long-term conflict.

The war of attrition worked against the United States; Henry Kissinger's analysis was that ‘we fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one’ (MACK, 1969, p. 184). The NVA/VC were in their own territory, speaking their own language – and fighting for national survival. On the other hand the Americans were fighting far from home, their own territory was not at risk, and the US government certainly did not enlist the overwhelming support of the electorate (indeed, President Lyndon Johnson's main priority was the domestic challenge of his ‘Great Society’ programme) (SUMMERS, 1995, p. 12).

The fact that the Vietnamese already had experience of irregular warfare (French-Indochinese War) was an advantage to Giap because this kind of war was not understood by Western culture. This could be seen at different levels: Lieutenant Colonel Vann and other American advisors insisted on eliminating the Vietcong ‘if they at least stand up and fight’ (ALEXANDER, 1998, p. 165); General Westmoreland disagreed, having an explicit ‘aversion to dispersing small numbers of US soldiers throughout the villages of South Vietnam’ (MCMALLISTER, 2010-2011, p. 106-107) when the US Marines developed the Combined Action Program

(CAP). Robert MacNamara said ‘Hanoi's persistence was incredible. I don't understand it, even to this day’ (RECORD, 2005-2006, p. 18-31). In fact there is a historical aversion to COIN on the part of the US military and instead a persistent preoccupation with ‘high-technology conventional warfare’ (RECORD, 2005-2006, p. 26).

Caverley (2009, p. 141-144) argues that political influence was exerted upon American military strategy in Vietnam with the connivance of the military leadership. ‘Operation Rolling Thunder’ used airpower as a COIN strategy; according to MacNamara it was ‘expansive in dollars, but cheap in life’ (CAVERLEY, 2009, p. 140). Giap diluted his troops among the population, avoiding any concentration of units: consequently the American bombers caused many civilian casualties, a fact their opponents were not slow to use for propaganda purposes (SILVA, 2004, p. 409-412).

Giap's military strategy combined guerrilla and conventional tactics, immobilizing about 50% of the American and South Vietnamese forces by obliging them to protect facilities and communication lines³. Indeed, due to the quantity of troops used in defensive positions or logistical activities, when mounting offensive operations the Americans were generally unable to outnumber their enemy (ALEXANDER, 1998, p. 172).

In the ‘Tet Offensive’, Giap attempted to carry out a decisive action, similar to Dien Bien Phu in the French-Indochinese War. Though fighting with the same strategic approach, this operation failed⁴ as the third phase of People's War⁵, and yet Tet became a political-strategic triumph because it broke the United States' political will. The media's coverage of barbarism in the prosecution of the war – napalm, bombing of civilian targets, torture, extrajudicial killings – reduced its legitimacy in the eyes of the US public. These practices were not accepted in American society due to its values of democracy and human rights.

Another important factor was that the Soviet Union and China supported the NVA/VC with weapons, ammunition and other equipment transported across the Vietnam-China border. These two powers, both with a veto in the United Nation Security Council, limited the freedom of action of the United States (BEAUFRE, 1998, p. 122-123). Moreover, the United States was afraid China might intervene directly, as had been the case in the Korean War, and thereby escalate the conflict. Also, Lyndon Johnson did not allow the invasion of North Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia, which made it easier for the Vietcong to find safe havens (MCMALLISTER, 2010-2011, p. 104).

The United States neither won the support of the Vietnamese people nor convinced a sufficient majority of its own population that the war was justified: the battle

³ As ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ saw in the Arab Revolution.

⁴ Confirming Arreguin-Toft's theory (Chapter 3)

⁵ ‘Strategic Offensive’ in Mao's theory (Chapter 2).

² Vietcong or National Liberation Front; and North Vietnam Army or People's Army of Vietnam.

for 'hearts and minds' was not won. The leader of the western world was left with a traumatic dent to its pride as a military superpower.

The North Vietnamese and Vietcong were efficient at employing ends, ways and means. They had a well-defined political goal; a long-term approach; a well-designed strategy, which they adapted as the war progressed; and they devoted all their national resources to the war while also recruiting Chinese and Soviet support.

The Americans, meanwhile, miscalculated regarding the NVA/VC capability; had unclear political aims; and had to cope with various limitations on their strategy, such as public opinion, democratic values, elections and international relations. The U.S. did not bring its power to bear in the 'small war' that was Vietnam. Indeed, domestic and international limitations, and wrong strategy, prevented the United States from defeating the NVA/VC. As Kissinger said, 'the conventional army loses if it does not win' (MACK, 1975, p. 185).

5 THE SOVIET WAR IN AFGHANISTAN (1979-1989)

The historiography of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan is not as large as that for the Vietnam War, but is nevertheless instructive. The USSR invaded Afghanistan to support a coup d'état and maintain a pro-Soviet government. At the time the USSR was believed to have freedom of action because the US, its greatest adversary, was still in a period of post-Vietnam paralysis and the Carter administration had not taken action in the face of Soviet troop concentrations on the Afghanistan border (BAUMANN, 1993).

In fact, however, the international scenario was complex: the US did not accept the invasion of a country so close to the Persian Gulf oil reserves; the Iranians and Arabs were hostile to an atheist intervention in a Muslim country; Pakistan saw the intervention as a threat; and China too took a negative view of Soviet troops near her border. A large number of foreign countries were to aid the Afghan resistance with financial resources, equipment and training.

In ten years of conflict in Afghanistan the international community remained in active protest against the Soviets' presence, the first step having been the condemnation of the invasion in the UN General Assembly (RASANAYAGAM, 2005, p. 91). The US led the international response and the military support to the guerrillas (HAMMOND, 1987).

At first the Soviets had planned to employ their forces only to control urban areas and lines of communication; the Afghan army would fight the rebels. However, the mujahedeen (GOODSON, 2001, p. 2-33) guerrillas developed quickly and occupied about 75% of the country's rural territory, while defections and refusals

to fight reduced the size of the Afghan army by about two-thirds (GOODSON, 2001, p. 57). The Soviets were pushed into employing their troops directly against the guerrillas – an important strategic miscalculation.

Initially the Soviet troops were effective, with well-trained units and the technological advantages of helicopters and air strikes. The Soviets wished to depopulate rural areas, drying the 'sea' in which the mujahedeen 'fish' were swimming (GOODSON, 2001, p. 58-65). Barbarism spread, with arrests, torture and executions; hundreds of thousands were displaced with the bombing of villages that supported the mujahedeen.

The resistance received cross-border support from Iran and Pakistan – and due to international pressure the USSR could not extend the conflict to these neighbouring countries to eliminate the mujahedeen's sanctuaries. The turning point of the war was when the United States equipped the guerrillas with Stinger and British-made Blowpipe anti-aircraft missiles, restricting the Soviets' helicopter operations in the mountains and reducing the overall efficiency of their airpower (HOLMES, 2001, p. 78).

Another Soviet misjudgement regarded the will to resist on the part of Afghan society, made up of a complex web of rival tribes. The Islamic religion was the main motivating factor of 'jihad', the 'holy war' against the atheist invaders. Soviet attempts to win public support through government projects had no effect; popular sympathies were with the resistance. Indeed, the modernization projects became targets of terrorism, and so did members of government.

When Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985 he identified that the Soviet economy had problems. Key to perestroika (reconstruction) was a reduction in defence spending, and he felt the troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan. At the same time, one consequence of glasnost (candour) was the dissemination of information about the war in the Soviet media, which caused discontent among the population (MALLEY, 2002, p. 119-120). In 1988, facing domestic and international pressures, combined with the impossibility of defeating the mujahedeen, Gorbachev signed an agreement and subsequently withdrew the Soviet forces in 1989.

Galeotti argues that 'this war the Soviets never really tried to win' (MALLEY, 2002, p.165-166) because they did not employ their 'national power'. Moreover they used a force much smaller than the Americans used in Vietnam; the Soviet failure was not military but political.

In fact, this war had no winner. After ten years of fighting, countless villages were destroyed, a significant proportion of the civilian population was killed, refugees spilled across Afghanistan's borders, and the country remained in a state of civil war for many years.

The mujahedeen employed Mao's strategy with effectiveness in a protracted war, though the single, final, decisive battle advocated in Mao's doctrine did not

actually occur. 'Jihad' was fundamental in the conquest of 'hearts and minds' while foreign support provided the guerrillas with important resources.

Although the Soviets had clear aims and used the military strategic approach (barbarism); they made misjudgements and did not mobilize all their means as a superpower in a limited war. Other variables influenced of the outcome, such as the state of the Soviet economy, Gorbachev's domestic reforms, and the role of the international community.

In conclusion it can be said that, twenty years on, Henry Kissinger's words about Vietnam remained true for the Soviet war in Afghanistan: 'the guerrilla wins if he does not lose' (MACK, 1975 p. 178).

6 CONCLUSION

When a strong actor makes a strategic choice to fight a 'small war', it generally expects a quick victory at a low cost – but as has been seen above, this expectation has often been misplaced. In 'small wars' there are numerous factors that might impede strong actors, just as there are factors that work directly to the advantage of the weak.

Several academic studies and analysts' articles have sought to discover a specific factor underlying strong actors' military failure, but simplification is dangerous in the complex phenomenon of war. This essay has looked at the phenomenon from both sides, highlighting positive reasons for the success of weaker combatants and negative reasons for the failure of their stronger adversaries. None of these factors works in isolation; they are all interrelated.

Arreguín-Toft concludes that strong actors lose 'small wars' when they use the wrong strategy, and recommends the use of the same-approach for them. However the correct strategy depends on the enemy's choice. The weak actor cannot take on a stronger adversary in a conventional war; they only attain positive outcomes when they adopt irregular warfare. Nowadays, however, barbarism as the same-approach as irregular warfare is no longer accepted by public opinion or the international community. If conduct such as acting outside the law or overriding human rights is tolerated from guerrillas, this is not the case with states, particularly in democratic countries.

Moreover, barbarism is not the only strategic response available to a strong actor, but alternative forms of irregular warfare require more time, centralized planning and decentralized execution. Generally, high-level military and political leaders dislike irregular warfare methods because they are difficult to control or because they misunderstand what asymmetric warfare actually means. Vietnam was an example of this.

The trend towards weaker adversaries achieving greater military success strengthened after the Chinese Revolution, as Mao's theories became well known and

irregular warfare was used widely in anti-colonial struggles. Foreign support (political and financial backing, weapons, training, safe havens) is another critical factor: without it the weaker actor cannot maintain the level of hostilities necessary to impose a stalemate. Hence the great strategic struggle between the strong, trying to cut off external support, and the weak, trying to maintain and increase it. In 'small wars' the strong actor is not the one experiencing invasion, and therefore, as in the historical cases seen above, they lack the motivation to bring all their national power to bear. The weaker actor, meanwhile, does not see the war as 'small' but rather as 'total war'; survival – life or death – provides massive motivation.

Support from the local population, or the lack of it, is crucial in long-term conflicts; the history books contain glaring examples of the Soviets and the Americans failing to conquer 'hearts and minds' and therefore not building legitimacy in the area of operations.

As we have seen, the passage of time is also a major factor, being linked with motivation and the level of support: protracted conflicts throw up difficulties for the stronger actor and encourage resistance. The long duration of a conflict can impact on the stronger actor's economy, as with the USSR in Afghanistan, or make public opinion increasingly negative, as it happened with the US in Vietnam.

The media plays an important role, as with regard to Vietnam, influencing both the international community and the domestic public opinion, particularly in periods of elections. The democratization of war imposes political limits on military campaigns, restricting their scope. It should be borne in mind that victory in asymmetric conflict will be more political than military. The US and USSR actually dominated their enemies on the battlefield but success in the military sense did not produce political victory. They miscalculated, or had a misperception about the conflict they were involved in.

Herry Kissinger's comment on Vietnam in 1969 is not only applicable to the Soviets in Afghanistan but remains true for asymmetric conflicts in general:

We fought a military war; our opponents a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for a psychological exhaustion. In the process we lost sight of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla warfare: The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win (MACK, 1975, p. 1984-185).

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