Book Review: Adapting to Win: How Insurgents Fight and Defeat Foreign States in War by Noriyuki Katagiri

The early 21st century has been characterized by the rise of irregular forces in warfare, most recently in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Nigeria. In **Adapting to Win: How Insurgents Fight and Defeat Foreign States in War, Noriyuki Katagiri** *looks at the evolution of irregular forces and how they adapt and learn to succeed within the conditions of their conflict.* **Kenneth Martin** *finds that while the book presents some excellent ideas, it ignores the complexity of irregular warfare, and has too narrow an understanding of what constitutes victory in these types of conflicts, presenting them as a sequential 'board game' with a clearly defined winner and loser.*

**Adapting to Win: How Insurgents Fight and Defeat Foreign States in War.
Noriyuki Katagiri. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2014.**

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Adapting to Win: How Insurgents Fight and Defeat Foreign States in War by Noriyuki Katagiri presents an fascinating theory of the evolution of irregular forces in warfare as a key determinant of victory. This model is conceived of as a sequence, requiring that each iterative organisational evolution be followed in the proper order to obtain victory. Katagiri's work immediately should pique the interest of experts and the interested public alike, given the importance of irregular conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, and across the world. In its focus on organisational learning in conflict, it will keenly interest all those who work on the challenge of molding Western military, security and intelligence operating procedures to opponents who do not "play by the rules". However, a number of inconsistencies, a general lack of clarity, and narrow understanding of complex phenomenon deeply detract from an interesting core concept.
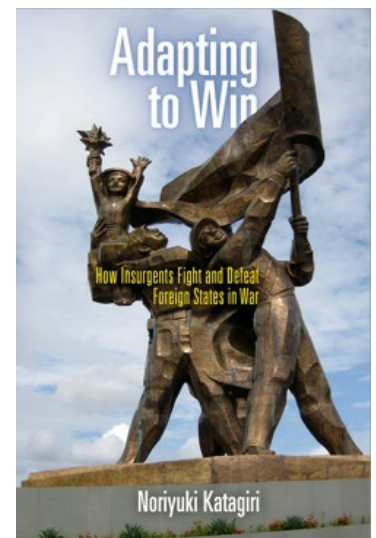
A key criticism of the work is a too narrow understanding of victory conditions, and a very narrow understanding of civil conflicts more generally. Katagiri assumes throughout the work that all insurgents seek to supplant the state they are fighting on its own terms – all insurgents seek to govern in the same ways the state they are fighting govern, within the same general institutional boundaries familiar to all states. This is a poor assumption on historical grounds, in that many of his cases (drawn from the colonial era) did not experience Western style statehood at all before their colonization, and understood the goals and conduct of warfare very differently. Furthermore, Katagiri believes that insurgency is a zero sum game between two decision making actors. One actor plays a "strategy", and the other actor responds with another strategy, which may or may not be "correct" to win. This ignores all the complexity of irregular warfare, and cannot capture multi-sided civil wars, broad based popular movements, or competing leaders within the same broad alliance.   The civil population in these wars – which remains a key variable for the context of the conflict for Katagiri – gets a remarkably shallow treatment, with little discussion of why the population supports or does not support an actor, despite institution/state building being perhaps *the* key variable of victory or defeat in the book.

Katagiri does not postulate scenarios, and indeed appears to edge some of the historical data away from the idea, where both the insurgents and the foreign state "lose" – one can think quickly of the American intervention in Iraq in 2003, for example (to his credit, Katagiri does discuss this case's complexity on pages 95-98, but without resolving this key concern) – or where the insurgent is fundamentally disinterested in "winning" statehood. Katagiri's model likely would find no place for insurgents that are interested in profit, or mere power, such as in Burma, Mali, or some

areas of Central and Latin America. Katagiri cites Kissinger's "the enemy wins if he does not lose", but does not seem to have considered the many possibilities within this idea.

For a theory that is based in a rational-decision making understanding of choices of strategy, Katagiri also gives very little weight to the actors' agency in influencing the context of the conflict. Why is a given moment in the Malay Emergency the time for "state-building" (87) and not another? Why did Libyan rebels successfully find the moment (in hindsight, this looks truly mistaken) to "begin to create institutions" (174), whereas the Taliban have not successfully done so (176-183), despite their influential shadow governance of much of the country? The work, like a chess game, seems to assume a timer in the background of the action, in which time X is when "state building" should be played, but this is never discussed explicitly. Instead, Katagiri seems to deny that the actors, by fighting a violent conflict over the population, influence their environment and thus constantly shift the costs and benefits of various strategies.

Finally, there is an unfortunate tendency in the work to move to quick tangents, reference key ideas without explaining them, and an overall difficult writing style that makes key concepts fuzzy at important intervals. A key starting point of the work, the Maoist model of guerrilla war floats unconnected to the main body. This model is constantly cited and compared against other cases (and forms an entire case chapter), despite it being unclear how a theory of civil war – between a Chinese Nationalist government and a Chinese Communist insurgent – applies to Katagiri's cases of extrasystemic wars where a local insurgent fights a foreign intervener. Key terms are not always well or even minimally discussed. For example, a section on the "Necessary Conditions for Sequencing Theory" (87), which is often – but not always – copied in other case study chapters – Katagiri discusses various aspects of the conflict leading to the defeat of the insurgency, but never identifies any necessary conditions by name, leaving the reader to assume he means state-building and guerilla war, but without any explanation to what these mean to the players. These tendencies are reinforced by occasional empty, or poorly edited language, such as the US "shock and awe" strategy being "a military doctrine that promoted the use of overwhelming power to gain rapid dominance of [sic] battlefield" – which may serve to be the definition of most, if not all, military doctrines, and gives us nothing about "shock and awe".

Overall, however, the core of "Adapting to Win" presents excellent ideas on how we may view irregular conflicts – that success in war requires organisations to adapt to the conditions of the conflict correctly, and that conflicts have stages. In this, it forms part of an emerging and fascinating literature on organisational learning in warfare. Unfortunately, much of the text passes over key logical assumptions, and tends to whitewash complexity in the search for the sequenced concept of warfare. The book presents irregular conflict as a two players sitting over a

board game, where the victory conditions are clearly defined, the rules are understood by both parties and work in the same way for both, and everyone can make decisions that are instantly effective. The book, therefore, has all the major advantages, and severe shortfalls of any model of complex activity. It serves to focus our attention on a few key dynamics while ignoring most others. "Adapting to Win", if read with the understanding of this limitation, will raise interesting points, but may frustrate a reader looking for explanation and deep discussion.

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