Approaching Foreign Policy by Type of Conflict

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Introduction

There are a few intellectual frameworks used to organize the strategies designed to confront the various foreign policy dilemmas in our world. There is the traditional hawk and dove dichotomy, where each strategy is classified based on their willingness to use force and how effective they expect it to be. There is the realist and internationalist framework, where you classify states by how much you expect them to behave selfishly and how much you expect them to behave cooperatively. Then there is the regional framework, where each foreign policy problem is classified by where it is located in the world and what other countries surround it, so that the individual history and circumstances can be brought to bear on the problem when trying to solve it. In this policy memo, I present a new framework for thinking about foreign policy that classifies potential wars between states by the type of military conflict. I identify four main underlying types of conflict, where it can be a war against terrorism, a war to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, a war to expand democracy to new countries, or a war that would allow one region to secede from another country.

With this framework in hand, one can gather up all the examples for each individual cause for war, and then see what strategies work and do not work for each type of conflict. Once you have a specific set of rules built up from what worked in the past, then when a new conflict of this type arises you know exactly how to respond. In theory then, you could improve your response to each type of crisis by developing a set of best practices, and hopefully this would also limit our inclinations to start wars that turn into disasters, so that not only do we have fewer military conflicts but the ones we do experience are much more likely to be successful. In the rest of this policy memo, I go through each type of conflict, and then develop a simple set of rules to consider when developing your own strategy for that type, in the hopes that this can systematically improve our response overall.

First Type of Conflict: Wars Against Terrorism

For nearly 20 years after 9/11, the United States has been confronted with a new foreign policy problem, which is how do you deal with extremist Islamic movements that are dedicated to inflicting harm on the country through large scale terrorist operations. This has led to full blown military conflicts against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, as well as against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. One key feature of each of these conflicts is their asymmetric nature, where the US has a clear conventional military advantage, but the opposing forces try and impose enough costs against us so that we ultimately want to end the conflict and leave the region entirely.

In a previous paper, I examined the underlying strategic dynamics of these new military insurgencies using a special auction I discovered and develop a set of rules for dealing with them (Sly 2018). In it, I propose four rules that help achieve peace in the long run, not necessarily by avoiding war at all costs, but by determining when the strategic gains make it worth it to continue fighting in a region. The first rule is to avoid taking all the benefits of governance for yourself, where setting up a system of government just so you can get everything you want out of it, ultimately builds resentment in a county by leaving other factions completely shut out of the benefits of ruling. Propping up the Shah in Iran is one example where violating this rule eventually caused a great deal of trouble for the US. The second rule is to offer a fair deal of democracy and self determination so that the different factions within a country have a seat at the table and can get their concerns resolved peacefully. This is the approach we have been trying in Afghanistan and Iraq and is one reason the wars there have not turned out worse, since we have not tried to install our own authoritarian puppet regime there. The third rule is to support those fair deals with military force, where some faction might want to take all the benefits of governance for themselves and try and undermine a governing structure that shares power between the two sides. In my previous paper, I develop a specific set of rules for when it makes sense to fight and when it makes sense to give up or strive for peace. Since the insurgency in Afghanistan imposes only a moderate cost, the paper suggests that it makes sense to keep fighting there, but to also try and resolve the conflict through peace negotiations at the same time. The fourth rule says that you need to destroy crazy escalators that have grand designs to expand their power over a whole region. Crazy escalators are factions that try to get everything they want by constantly imposing the maximum amount of force and terror at every opportunity until everyone surrounding them completely capitulates. ISIS is an example of a crazy escalator and since they have plans to control the entire Middle East, it makes sense to do what it takes to destroy them as quickly as possible.

These four rules then provide a specific set of strategies to deal with the problem of Islamic terrorism and insurgencies in the Middle East. When a new conflict arises, it gives us a toolkit to draw upon to deal with the crisis, and helps us prioritize which strategies are more likely to work. This set of strategies is not one that simply argues whether force does or does not work, but instead lays out a sophisticated set of rules to help decide when it makes sense to use force and when it does not, and offers us a potential solution when dealing with conflicts of this particular type.

Second Type of Conflict: Wars Preventing Nuclear Proliferation

The second type of war is the one designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, and is best represented by the war in Iraq. Oftentimes this is referred to as a desire to stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but realistically, stopping the spread of chemical and biological weapons is far less important than stopping the spread of nuclear weapons which is the real priority in this case. In order to deal with this particular type of problem, there are a few tools at our disposal, where first diplomatic pressure can be applied, then if that does not work then economic sanctions can be imposed. These should clearly be the first steps adopted to try and end a program of nuclear weapons development, and this approach has worked for South Africa, Libya, and Iran, as well as the former Soviet states that had nuclear weapons stationed on their territory. In addition, Iraq presents an unusual case because the economic sanctions ended up stopping Saddam Hussein's nuclear program,

even though we ultimately ended up invading the country thinking they did have a nuclear weapons program.

Sometimes these approaches do not work, as has been the case in North Korea, Pakistan, and India who have all become nuclear powers in recent decades. Then the question becomes whether you are willing to start a war and overthrow the regime in order to end the nuclear weapons program there. Iraq has shown us this might turn out to be more difficult then you expect, and might not be a realistic option for major military powers like North Korea, Pakistan, and India. Plus, the US has a strong nuclear deterrent that has successfully prevented any other countries with nuclear weapons from ever using them. That means deterrence does work, and thus limits the downside to cases where a country gains nuclear weapons. True, it does reduce the leverage the US has from our advantage with conventional weapons when this happens, and this perhaps has allowed North Korea and Pakistan to misbehave more than they otherwise would have, but at the same time nuclear deterrence sometimes makes it less likely that war will break out, as exemplified by the lack of direct military conflict between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The basic conclusion to be reached then is that diplomatic and economic pressure often work to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, that a military intervention to overthrow a regime oftentimes is not an option, and when it is, the costs of doing so are likely greatly underestimated and the costs of failing to do so are likely greatly overestimated. That means the cases so far where a country has been invaded to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, basically just Iraq, have not turned out well in the end. Ultimately, then diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions are reasonable tools to be used, but going as far to start a war probably is not, since we can limit the strategic disadvantage through our own nuclear deterrence. This then provides us with a set of tools to be used at our discretion when presented with the second type of military conflict.

Third Type of Military Conflict: Wars of Democratization

The third type of military conflict are the wars that develop in order to increase the spread of democracy around the world. There are not any good examples of wars that were started solely for the reason of spreading democracy, though this has been an important motivation for fighting both World War I and World War II (in Europe and Japan) as well as the second war in Iraq. In general, fighting a war of democratization would probably not be a good idea unless the country being invaded had already established themselves as a security threat to their neighbors. In addition, in order for the war of democratization to make sense, the undemocratic country needs to be able to be overthrown at reasonable cost, and also the democratic country needs to be willing to station their troops in the recently invaded country for an unlimited period of time.

The first rule draws on the experience of Word War I and World War II, where the US entered wars in order to deal with the underlying security threat presented by Germany and Japan. The second rule is basically a rule of common sense, where if the undemocratic security threat had nuclear weapons (like Russia) or a major military deterrent (like North Korea) then it might not make sense to invade there if the military costs of doing so were to get too high. The third rule draws on the experience of Iraq,

where perhaps Iraq could be seen as a security threat, and perhaps the costs of overthrowing the regime were not too high, but the fact that the US was not willing to station troops there indefinitely ultimately led to new wars and greater instability in the region. This then is the basic proposed framework for dealing with wars of democratization, and gives us a strategic approach to deal with one more type of conflict.

Fourth Type of Military Conflict: Wars of Secession

The fourth type of military conflict occurs when a particular region within a country wants to secede from the government there and create their own country. There are a multitude of examples of this type of conflict, where the Bosnians in Yugoslavia, the Muslims in Kashmir, the Sunnis in Syria, and the Kurds in Iraq all fought wars of secession among many others. When coming up with a set of rules to determine how to deal with this type of conflict, ideally it would develop a strategy where these issues could resolved peacefully rather than through war.

The most important piece of this strategy then is the peaceful referendum that lets a region vote whether or not to leave a country and if enough people say yes then the region is allowed to secede peacefully. Of course, not every country wants to lose a part of their territory and population, and part of the problem is that the rest of the country often suffers a loss once one region decides to secede. The basic tradeoff then has to weigh the importance to the region that wants to secede against the loss to the region they are seceding from, and unfortunately, our current system of referendums decided by majority rule does not weigh this tradeoff well. If a specific region votes and determines that a narrow majority wants to secede, then this means the benefits of seceding barely outweigh the costs solely to the people living in the region. If there are other costs to the country being seceding from, then the combined costs to both the seceding region and the rest of the country might substantially outweigh the benefits, even if a narrow majority within the region decided to secede. This creates an error of one particular type, where a region decides to secede even though it was a bad idea to do so. If, however, there was a super majority requirement of say three fifths or two thirds, then this would reduce this type of error and ensure that a region only secedes when the benefits to both the region and the rest of the country outweigh the overall costs.

Of course, there is another type of error where a country that should be able to secede is denied from doing so by the power of the central government. In this case, diplomatic and economic pressure needs to be brought to bear until a binding referendum is allowed to take place. This is not always going to be easy to do, but if the binding referendum were allowed to have a super majority requirement, then this would reduce the chance of making the mistake that a region secedes when they really should not have. If the risk of this type of error were reduced, that might make it more likely to approve a binding referendum, and the super majority requirement could even be set even higher (say to 90 percent), knowing it would fail, but still giving the region a chance to demonstrate how many of them really wanted to leave. If there are fewer secession errors due to a standard majority requirement, then this might make it easier to approve binding referendums, which might reduce the likelihood that a region is forced to resort to military conflict in order to achieve their secessionist desires. This would not completely solve all the political conflict over secessionist goals, but it would propose a way to make

them less severe and perhaps reduce the risk that it leads to war. This then provides us with an approach to deal with the fourth type of conflict as a whole, which is wars of secession.

Conclusion

So far, this policy memo has laid out a new way of thinking about foreign policy that classifies each particular problem by the type of conflict it presents. This is different than the current approaches that tends to label people as hawks vs doves, or realists vs internationalists. This also provides a different way of approaching the problems rather than simply relying on a regional framework that classifies conflicts by geographic location. Using this approach, there are four types of military conflicts: wars against terrorism, wars to prevent nuclear proliferation, wars of democratization, and wars of secession. Each type of conflict has its own set of proscribed rules on how to deal with them that looks at the historical record and examines how well various strategies have worked in the past. By condensing them into a set of best practices, this provides a simple toolkit to draw upon when faced with new dilemmas of a particular type. This will not be able to solve all the problems presented by potential military conflicts, but perhaps by changing the way we think about the problem it can improve the strategies we ultimately adopt.

References

Sly, James. 2018. “Optimal Insurgency Theory: Modeling International Conflict with the All Pay First Price Auction.” Unpublished working paper. February.