Avoiding Foreign Insurgencies

By James Sly

June 2020

Introduction

In modern times, military conflicts appear to be shifting away from short, brutal, all out conventional wars and toward long, drawn out, asymmetric insurgencies. In one of my previous papers, I provide a new model of conflict between dominant and insurgent forces using a new type of auction I discovered, and also provide a framework for determining when dominant and insurgent powers should capitulate or seek peace (Sly 2018). This policy memo provides a parallel argument based on the same model to try and to determine when major powers should support foreign insurgencies in other countries. The short answer is that foreign insurgencies are always a disaster and should be avoided under almost all circumstances.

Four Ways Foreign Insurgencies Go Wrong

There are four primary ways an insurgency can turn out badly. First, and most obviously, is that insurgencies can lead to enormous humanitarian disasters, which happens almost all of the time. The insurgency in Afghanistan started in the late 1970s and the country is still engaged in military conflict there more than 40 years later. In the war between Vietnam and the United States, more than a million and perhaps even two million civilians died in that war along with hundreds of thousands of troops while fighting in the country went on there for over a decade before the United States eventually pulled out. The more recent insurgencies in Syria and Yemen have inflicted massive amounts of harm on those countries, killing hundreds of thousands in Syria and at least a hundred thousand in Yemen.

Second, the insurgent forces can lose the conflict, so that the country has to experience the difficulties of war without any gaining any benefits from changing those who rule the country. Clearly, insurgencies are not always victorious, and some research suggests that peaceful insurgencies are more likely to succeed than violent ones.(1) If the insurgents lose, then that means there was a large cost but no ultimate benefit, making it an ill advised adventure both for the insurgents and those supporting the insurgents.

Third, the insurgent forces can win but then go on to govern the country badly. This is what happened in Vietnam, where the communist insurgency won but then the country was forced to live under strict authoritarian rule in support of a discredited economic ideology. Vietnam is still a communist country, and still has very few democratic freedoms. Afghanistan is another case where the insurgents won, but the victorious forces ended up governing badly. Ultimately, even after the Russians left, the country was still stuck with a civil war between the western friendly Northern Alliance and the ruling Islamic oriented Taliban that was supported by Pakistan. Conservative Islamic ideologies do not always lend themselves

to effective governing institutions, and much of Afghanistan was forced to live under their oppressive rule while also suffering through the pain inflicted by the ongoing civil war. The problem of course is that the militaristic virtues that lead to wartime victories do not easily turn into the technocratic competence that countries usually need when recovering from a protracted civil war, so no one should be surprised when the new rulers leave a lot to be desired.

Fourth, once a country starts supporting a foreign insurgency, then they can never cut back on that support without risking severe blowback from their insurgent allies. This is most obvious in Afghanistan, where the US supported Islamic insurgents in the 1980s, who were ultimately able to prevail there. Once the US stopped supporting the insurgents after the Soviet Union pulled out, resentment grew among the forces that were previously our allies, and Al-Qaeda ultimately retaliated by executing the 9/11 terror attacks. This means after the US supported a successful foreign insurgency in Afghanistan, they were forced to go back and fight their own insurgency against the very same factions that they originally built up in the first place. Another less known example is when India withdrew their support for the Tamil insurgents in Sri Lanka and then forces there went on to assassinate Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

Ultimately, this leads to a situation where there are so many ways foreign insurgencies can go wrong, that there are basically no modern examples where insurgencies have turned out well over the long run. All were humanitarian disasters in some form, some ended up failing to win the military conflict, and many others won the civil war but failed to govern effectively. At least two ended up going ahead and attacking the foreign power that initially supported them after they removed their aid, so that there are very few ways this can end well.

Why Insurgencies Are Never Worth It

The thing is that a combination of game theory and behavioral economics basically predicts that foreign insurgencies will ultimately impose more costs than they create in benefits. The problem is that insurgencies impose short term costs in order to get long term improvements in the quality of governance. If insurgencies are short and there is a dramatic improvement in those who rule, then in theory the long term benefits are worth the short term costs. In practice, however, there are some important psychological biases that basically ensures that the conflict will go on longer than the break even point so that the short term costs of war ultimately outweigh the long term benefits of better governance.

The first problem is that the dominant power in an insurgency cannot give up until the insurgencies prove they can last a long period of time. The optimal way to approach this game theory problem is to have each side project who can last the longest, and then have the one that eventually loses give up right at the beginning, rather than fight the conflict at all. This happens all the time with insurgents, who guess how long the dominant power can fight, and if they do not think they can win, they do not fight at all. This is why insurgencies are still relatively rare. If the insurgents decide to fight, then the dominant power in theory could project to see who they think will win, and then give up right away if they think the conflict will not end well for them. This however never happens since dominant powers

are always trying to deter new insurgencies from forming, and the only ones that consistently survive are self selected to also be the ones willing to fight a long time to preserve their rule, otherwise they would have been quickly overthrown decades ago. Because dominant powers are self selected to be willing to fight a long time, they will not choose the optimal route and give up right away. At the same time, insurgents often decide not to fight at all, but when they do decide to fight, they only will do so if they believe they can outlast the dominant power, which means they will not give up right away either. That means when conflicts do arise, they only arise when neither side is going to do the optimal thing and give up right away, which means insurgencies only develop if both sides are committed to fighting a long time.

The second problem is that neither side ever wants to give up because victory is always just around the corner. We already discussed how the optimal strategy is to project ahead to see who is going to win, and if your side ends up eventually losing, then you should give up right away. There is another trick to the game theory dynamics, where a side should give up immediately, not only if they lose, but if the other side continues fighting long enough to make the short term costs higher than the long term benefits. If the insurgency gives up before that break even point, then it made sense for the dominant power to fight the war, but if the insurgents fight longer than this break even point (even if the insurgents eventually lose), then the dominant power should have given up right away as well.

The obvious thing to do is keep fighting until the other side lasts long enough to get past that break even point, and then give up once that point is reached. Then you know for sure that you should not have fought the war in the first place, but do manage to limit the damage from a horrible quagmire. The problem is that even if it did not make sense to fight the war from the beginning because it ended up lasting, say, more than 10 years, then once you get to that point, those costs are already incurred and should basically be ignored when deciding what to do in the future. Then the game theory problem basically tells us that the insurgent power needs to last 10 *more* years for it to make sense to have the dominant power give up exactly 10 years into the conflict, and that those first 10 years just need to be forgotten. The mistake then is that the dominant power often believes that the insurgency cannot last 10 *more* years, even if they already lasted for 10 years before that, and that victory is just around the corner so they should keep continuing to fight.

This game theory dynamic then combines with the powerful bias to never give up on a project that you have invested a lot of resources in. The basic problem is that it is psychologically difficult to admit that any enormous endeavor you engaged in for a very long time was a big mistake and just a waste of valuable time and resources. Because people are very hesitant to admit that exact mistake, dominant powers are not willing to admit that fighting the first 10 years of a war was a mistake, and so they want to keep fighting another 10 years (since victory is just around the corner), even if fighting was only worth it if the conflict lasted less than 10 years.

This then creates a horrible combination, where in any insurgent conflict dominant powers are always dedicated to fight a long time to deter future insurgencies and stay in power, and the insurgents are self selected, where the only ones willing to start a war are also the ones willing to fight a long time. Once the fighting starts and both sides are committed, that basically guarantees the fighting will last longer

than the break even point where the short term costs of fighting end up outweighing any long term improvements in governance. Even worse, both sides often believe victory is just around the corner and the other side cannot last that much longer and are especially determined to keep going so that they do not have to admit that the first part of the war was just a big mistake. That means it is likely that the conflict goes on two or three times beyond the 10 year break even point before the other side finally admits the war really will last 10 *more* years and so it makes sense to give up immediately. This is how insurgencies that do start almost always turn into quagmires, because the game theory dynamics along with psychological biases combine to ensure that both sides are committed to continuing the conflict well beyond what actually made sense in the first place.

What Happens If Insurgencies Go Away

Let us assume for the moment, that the arguments given so far are entirely convincing, and all countries throughout the world decide to create a new international norm that major powers should never support insurgencies in foreign countries. What effect would this have on the world? Would it actually make it more peaceful, or would other countries be more likely to invade their neighbors because there is no more fear of it turning into a decade long quagmire?

The way I analyzed how this would all turn out is to think of it like a modified Colonel Blotto game. The Colonel Blotto game is a classic game theory problem, where there are two sides fighting a war on many battlefields and have to decide how to distribute their fixed amount of troops among the various battlefields. Whichever side devotes the most troops to a battlefield wins that particular battle, and whoever wins the most battles ends up winning the whole war. To understand our problem at hand, you need to assign a value to each battlefield rather than have them all be equal, and to give different values to different players. I call this the Colonel Blotto game with asymmetric values.

You can think of this game using a standard X-Y graph, where each battlefield gets plotted on the graph based on the value to each player. Along the 45 degree line, there are three key points, the battlefields of little value to both sides (the lower left corner), the battlefields of moderate value to both sides (the middle), and the battlefields of high value to both sides (the upper right corner). At the same time, there are battlefields extremely valuable to player 1 but not valuable to player 2 (which are in the lower right corner), and battlefields extremely valuable to player 2 but not valuable player 1 (which are in the upper left corner).

When thinking about the current world, the corners where one battlefield is much more valuable to one side than the other are entirely peaceful (the upper left and lower right corners). These get carved out as protected spheres of influence, where the side who values them less basically gives up on them and never contests control there, because the other side values them so highly. At the same time, the upper right corner is completely peaceful too, because those battlefields are so incredibly valuable to both sides that they earn a nuclear deterrent from one side or the other. This is basically how Europe got divided down the middle between the US and the Soviet Union. The battlefields that neither find valuable are basically ignored by the major powers and conflicts might break out there based on local

concerns (as has developed in Africa), but the major powers are not concerned enough to devote their own resources to start a war there.

That means in our current environment all four corners are basically peaceful, and it is only the spot right in the middle (which could be seen as the Middle East) where both sides find a battlefield moderately valuable that are vulnerable to major wars. These countries are not valuable enough to garner the protection of a nuclear deterrent, but are valuable enough not to be completely ignored either. Without the nuclear deterrent, this makes these middle battlefields vulnerable to outside invasion by a major power, but then the opposing power can counter that invasion by supporting an insurgency there. This middle area is then where countries are likely to be invaded and have insurgencies form.

If the threat of insurgency were taken away, this would make it more likely to be invaded by another major power, but knowing that would be a risk, there would be a push to expand the countries protected by a nuclear deterrent as well. This would push some countries currently in the middle into a world that looked like the upper right corner where every country had a nuclear deterrent protecting them. Removing the threat of an insurgency in the Middle East would make Iran vulnerable to invasion by the US, so then Russia might extend their nuclear deterrent there. At the same time, Saudi Arabia might be vulnerable to invasion from Russia, so the US might extend their nuclear deterrent to that country. Some of the countries then get pushed from the middle area of the graph (the Middle East portion) to the upper right area of the graph where countries are highly valued and earn themselves a nuclear deterrent (the European portion). Other countries will not be deemed valuable enough to earn a nuclear deterrent so they will get pushed to the lower left area where they basically get ignored (the Africa portion). That means the likely result of an insurgency ban is to have some countries in the Middle East end up more peaceful because they have a nuclear deterrent, and to have some countries end up essentially neglected, where wars could break out but they would be less severe since they did not have the support of a major world power. The end result of an insurgency ban would be fewer conflicts that were likely less severe, which would be a desirable result overall.

Conclusion

So far, this policy memo has tried to explain the four ways that insurgencies can go wrong, and how the game theory structure combined with some psychological biases basically ensures that an insurgency will never be worth fighting. It then goes on to argue that a ban on insurgencies would be a good thing, because more countries would get a nuclear deterrent and the ones that did not would have less severe conflicts because of the lack of international involvement. Even though this was not done here, one could also look at the historical record and find very few examples of an insurgency that succeeded not only in earning a military victory, but also improving the level of governance in the country they gained control over, so that hopefully, at this point, it has become clear that a major world power should never support insurgencies in other countries.

End Note

#1 – In their recent book, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (2011) do a statistical analysis that compares nonviolent uprisings to violent uprisings and finds that between 2000 and 2006 about 70% of non-violent campaigns succeeded, which is about 5 times the success rate for violent uprisings. Going back to the beginning of the 20th century, the nonviolent campaigns succeeded about 53% of the time compared to 26% for violent campaigns.

References

Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. 2011. Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict. New York: Columbia University Press.

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