

Discussion of “Attack when the World is not watching?”

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Summary of discussion

- ▶ **Punch line of paper:** Excluding attacks that occur during a prolonged war, the data from 2000 to 2011 display evidence that Israeli attacks causing significant civilians casualties happened significantly more frequently the day before a day with high expected news pressure on other topics in the United States.
- ▶ **Interpretation by authors:** proof of the joint hypothesis that Israel cares about international reputation on human rights and that they act with a very sophisticated strategic timing. Not fully convinced that both hypotheses need to hold:
 - ▶ Israel may care about international reputation on human rights (at least some do) but the next day high news pressure on other topics could be endogenous outcome of American pro-Israel bias;
 - ▶ Israel may be very strategic on timing but could care about this for reasons other than human rights reputation.
- ▶ **Theory** may be helpful. I will propose a model to obtain separate structural hypotheses.

American media bias

- ▶ Couldn't it be the American Jewish lobby or the general pro-Israel public opinion that push American media, from the top and from customers, to expand coverage of other top news the day after a big Israel attack with civilian consequences?
- ▶ Competition effect could be consistent: given the pro-Israel American bias, the news station that alters down the space to other top stories to give space to the attack would lose customers, hence competition pushes down the time given to description of civilian casualties.
- ▶ In other words, it may seem that in those days there was high news pressure on other topics, but this high news pressure on other topics can be endogenous, since it is a choice of the media how much space to give to the big news items.
- ▶ Israel does not worry much about reputation costs given the expected endogenous news pressure, hence the strategic timing hypothesis could be redundant.

Model

- ▶ In order to study the strategic timing hypothesis alone, I suggest a model, where reputation costs are one of the many components.
- ▶ Consider an infinite horizon discrete time bargaining and war game between player J and player P. There is a disputed territory and the share of it controlled by player J at the beginning of time t is x_{t-1} .
- ▶ Utility for player J is $U_t^J(x_t) = \sum_{\tau=t}^{\infty} \delta^{\tau-t} u_{\tau}(x_{\tau})$.
- ▶ At every period t Nature assigns randomly to one of the players (prob $1/2, 1/2$) the possibility to decide to attack and challenge the status quo x_{t-1} .

Stages 1/2

- ▶ If the challenger chosen by Nature is J, J can decide to attack or not, and the attack has cost $A_t^J(\alpha)$, which may depend on international attention shocks. Similarly, if the chosen challenger is P, P can decide to attack or not, with cost a^P in case of attack.
- ▶ If no attack occurs, then $x_t = x_{t-1}$;

Stages 2/2

- ▶ If player J attacks, player P decides whether to accept or start a full conflict. In case of acceptance,

$$x_t = x_{t-1} + \alpha(1/2 - |x_{t-1} - 1/2|)$$

and if P is the attacker and J concedes, the new state is

$$x_t = x_{t-1} - \alpha(1/2 - |x_{t-1} - 1/2|).$$

- ▶ On the other hand, if J attacks and P fights back, there is a conflict that yields

$$x_t = x_{t-1} \pm \beta(1/2 - |x_{t-1} - 1/2|)$$

where the probability of a plus (victory for J) is proportional to the relative control ($p(x)$ increasing in x), with $\beta \in [0, 1]$ is greater than α . However, this conflict costs w_i to each player $i = J, P$.

Intuitions

- ▶ With exogenous α , the higher is a_t^J the lower the incentives to attack, ceteris paribus.
- ▶ However, assume now that there are two types of attack, 1 and 2, where attack 1 has higher A but also higher α in case of acceptance.
- ▶ Then shocks from international attention could be to w_t^P and p_t , causing P to accept a larger α induced by attack 1 – hence attack 1 timing motivated by larger α shift possible, not by reputation caring.

More generally

- ▶ With size of "attempted status quo shift" α endogenous, one could use this model to study the strategic responsiveness of players to all kinds of shocks, not just a_t^J or a_t^P .
- ▶ If war is due to commitment problems, attacks in equilibrium could also be of preventive or preemptive type sometimes, hence one should also be able to see evidence of timing of Israel attacks in anticipation of changes of power abroad that would strengthen the Palestinian cause;
- ▶ In the model unilateral attacks with α shift would typically be followed by a war with positive probability (for standard bargaining failure reasons); but with lower cost a_t the attacker should be willing to try a larger α and hence accept a higher risk of full war.