Are You Certain? Leaders, Overprecision, and War

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Overview

Does greater certainty about an opponent’s military characteristics cause peace?
– Yes, if warranted, consistent with bargaining models
– No, if unwarranted due to overprecision errors
Certainty’s sources condition the consequences.

Overprecision errors are most likely when:
– Estimation process excludes elites who oversee diplomacy
– Leaders have no combat experience
Look to subjects making subjective estimates.

Evidence for the conditional relationship
Measure certainty in an original data set of declassified documents about crises involving the US during the Cold War.

Uncertainty, overprecision, bargaining

Standard bargaining theory of war (purely rationalist)
– Bargaining can fail when uncertain about opponent’s type.
– Risk-reward tradeoff leaves positive probability of war.
– Conflict is decreasing in certainty.

Bargaining with overprecision errors (partly behavioral)
– “(almost) everyone exhibits overprecision (almost) all the time” —Ortleva and Snowberg (forthcoming)
– Optimize based on overprecise estimate of opponent’s type
– Conflict can be increasing in certainty.

Theorizing certainty’s conditional effects

H1: State Department officials have less overprecision. State Dept involvement moderates the certainty-Conflict relationship.
– assume preference overlap ↔ information transmission
– Why: selection, learn from peers, or information set

H2: Presidents with combat experience have less overprecision, which moderates the certainty-Conflict relationship.
– Why: learn that priors are overprecise

Data

Observations: 44 opportunities for US to use force during Eisenhower through Ford administrations

Corpus: Declassified security documents (FRUS)
– private communication: meeting transcripts and memos
– ~ 850 texts; 9 speakers and 2,000 words per observation

Measuring certainty: Dictionary approach (for now)

FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1969–1976
VOLUME XIX, PART 1, KOREA, 1969–1972, DOCUMENT 17

17. Memorandum From ... the loss of smaller attack aircraft will be more palatable (in terms of lives and dollars) than the loss of B–52s.

Design & Findings

Outcome
– Conflict

Explanatory
– Interaction of Uncertainty and State Dept Involvement
– Interaction of Uncertainty and Combat Background

Controls
– Capabilities, Regime, Proximity, Party, Age, Enemy Type

Conditional on Crisis, State Department is Relatively Uncertain

Implications for Conflict

Certainty Across Crises

Conditional Relationship between Certainty and Conflict

p < 0.05 for both interaction terms

Washington, April 18, 1969.

Somento seca from Secretary of Defense to President Nixon (in)

Among those reasons are that:
– B–52 strikes are synonymous—rightly or wrongly—with massive, indiscriminate bombing. At 30 tons of bombs per B–52, there is some
– Just as there (as it is not declassified)
– Few cases are even experiences—rightly or wrongly—wil circumstances, but activities in known, a given case of bombs per (B–52), there is some
– No state opinion, there are not involving smaller aircraft loads and destruction impact
– Given error in crisis stage, how many (it is not declassified) the loss of smaller attack aircraft will be more palatable (in terms of lives and dollars) than the loss of B–52s.