

Rebel Capacity and Randomized Combat

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Abstract:

Classic theories of counterinsurgency claim rebel forces execute attacks in an unpredictable manner to limit the government's ability to anticipate and defend against them. We study a model of combat during an irregular insurgency, where the precision of attacks varies with the ability of insurgents to gather intelligence about the vulnerability of targets across time. We test empirical implications of the theoretical model using newly declassified military records from Afghanistan that track the within-day timing of insurgent attacks on security targets. We pair our conflict microdata with granular information on local opium production, yield heterogeneity, and farmgate prices, which enable us to estimate the quantity of annual taxes extracted from farmers and traffickers. Consistent with our model, we find that the capacity (wealth) of local rebel units influences the timing of their attacks. As rebels extract more resources, the timing of their operations deviates substantially from a random allocation of violence. We test additional empirical implications of our model using novel tactical and survey data on the Taliban's spy operations, rebel infiltration of the Afghan security forces, and latent public support for non-stated armed actors. These findings clarify how the accumulation of economic resources by armed groups influences not just when, but how civil wars are fought.