

Effect of military operations on diplomatic relations and peaceful dispute resolution

Interventions supporting rebels have a moderate effect on negotiations but weaken agreement stability, whereas military backing for government hinders negotiations, but strengthens agreements.

Geographical region: Global

Effect: Moderate effect ($g = 0.107$)

Confidence in study findings: Low confidence

Short summary

Military interventions aim to prevent, de-escalate, or resolve conflicts and may affect diplomatic relations and dispute resolution by shaping negotiations and agreement stability. Interventions supporting rebels have a moderate effect on negotiations but weaken agreement stability, whereas military backing for government hinders negotiations, but strengthens agreements. Mediation and security guarantees have the most positive effects. Military support for the government makes agreements more likely to be upheld, while support for rebels lowers this likelihood. As suggested by these results, the effect depends on context, conflict stage, and strategic considerations; for example, military intervention is more likely to have a positive effect if the conflict-affected state is a democracy, and parties are more willing to enter negotiations if the conflict has reached a stalemate.

Long summary

The intervention

Any efforts that involve the use of a state's armed forces to prevent, de-escalate or resolve a violent conflict or atrocity. This excludes peacekeeping missions provided by multilateral forces. This could be operations where armed forces are engaged in combat and those that do not have primary objectives to engage in combat (i.e. the presence of armed forces in specific locations or for training). This also includes cyberwarfare operations when delivered by a state's armed forces.

How the intervention is expected to work?

Military interventions and support may have an effect on diplomatic relations and peaceful dispute resolution by shaping negotiations and agreement stability. It is plausible that outside support for rebels may increase the likelihood of government agreeing to negotiations, whereas support to government will reinforce their resolve, and so unwillingness to enter negotiations. Support provided to the government may enhance agreement durability. Hence, interventions favoring one side may undermine overall peace efforts, making outcomes context dependent.

Evidence base

This cell contains 2 quantitative studies: Biswas (2007) and Findley (2012)

Biswas (2007) uses cross-national data from 32 countries and 56 rebel groups from the Minorities at Risk (MAR) dataset. Findley (2012) analyzes a dataset which includes 234 observations from 116 civil wars since 1945, comprising 116 observations in the first stage, 70 observations in the second stage, and 48 observations in the third stage, covering multiple countries worldwide. The cell also has 2 qualitative papers: Hasan (2015), Sub Saharan Africa and Fitzsimmons (2013), Middle East & North Africa.

Evidence findings

External intervention supports agreements and negotiations, though its effects vary. Biswas (2007) finds that while external intervention generally aids these processes, military intervention favouring one side reduces the likelihood of both negotiations and reaching an agreement. Similarly, Findley (2012) notes that military intervention supporting the rebels has a significant positive effect on initiating negotiations, whereas military intervention on behalf of the government decreases this likelihood. Additionally, one of the most influential factors in maintaining an agreement is external military support for the government, while military intervention for the rebels lowers the likelihood of the agreement being upheld. Other contextual factors may mediate effects; for example, military intervention is more likely to have a positive effect if the conflict-affected state is a democracy, and parties are more willing to enter negotiations if the conflict has reached a stalemate.

Included studies

Biswas (2007) examines the relative and combined impact of domestic institutions and international intervention on whether negotiations take place and whether a settlement is reached. It is commonly assumed that conflict-affected areas are failed states. But that is not the case. Conflict-affected states have wide variation in their capacity, and so there is a potential role for domestic political structures.

The author applies a cross-national logit analysis of the correlates of negotiation and agreement using data from the analysis using the Minorities at Risk (MAR) dataset. The data comprise 475 observations covering 32 countries and 56 rebel groups.

The analysis shows that democracy increases the likelihood of negotiations being held and an agreement being reached, though it has a weaker effect for agreement than negotiations. External intervention also helps with both of these, but with differing effects. Military intervention (which favours one side) in fact reduces the probability of both negotiations and an agreement. Mediation and security guarantees (that is the promise of action, or inaction, in a given set of circumstances) have the greatest positive effect. If negotiations had been held in the previous year, the likelihood of an agreement being signed increases significantly.

But there is substantial variation in effects. The positive effect of democracy is from Asia, with no effect in Africa, the Middle East and the Former Soviet Union (FSU). In contrast, mediation is most effective in Africa, the Middle East and former Soviet Union, but not in Asia. Security guarantees work in Africa and the Middle East, but not Asia (and have not been used in FSU).

The study is rated medium confidence as a non-experimental design with only partial description of interventions and outcomes. There is no allowance for selection bias.

Findley (2012) examines the conditions under which a peace process in a civil war may be successful. He considers factors which create uncertainty about the eventual winner should a conflict continue – these are stalemates and the number of actors – affect the likelihood of successful implementation of the peace process. Stalemates and the number of actors can encourage cooperation early in a peace process but may impede it later on.

The author estimates a nested logit model with the dependent variable being an ordered, sequential scale measuring the stages of the peace process (0 = negotiations not started, 1 = negotiations held, 2 = agreement and 3 = successful implementation). The dataset includes 234 observations from 116 civil wars since 1945, comprising 116 observations in the first stage, 70 observations in the second stage, and 48 observations in the third stage. The explanatory variables include both the presence and role of the peacekeepers and a variable for a security guarantee. The latter is defined as “an explicit promise by the third party to insure, with a significant number of troops, that the terms of a peace agreement are implemented and that the state does not return to war” (p.13). There is also a variable for third-party military interventions, which will favour one side and thus may undermine the peace process.

The empirical analysis of the decision to negotiate shows that presence of a peace operation has a significant positive effect on the decision as does military intervention supporting the rebels, whereas military intervention on behalf of the government decreases the likelihood of negotiations. In contrast, peacekeeping has a negative (but just insignificant at 10%) effect on keeping an agreement, but a security guarantee has a large positive effect (also just insignificant at 10%). However, the positive effects of peacekeeping and a security guarantee disappear if the conflict had reached a stalemate.

The largest factors affecting whether an agreement is kept are power-sharing and external military support for the government, whereas military intervention for the rebels decreases the likelihood of the agreement being kept.

The number of factions makes negotiations more likely but does not affect the agreement being kept.

The author's main conclusion is that the success of third party intervention depends on a range of factors – including information on who would win if the conflict continued – so there is no ‘one size fits all’ and more research is needed to understand what works where. The stage of the peace process also affects effectiveness. Military intervention in support of the government makes negotiations less likely, but increases the chances of the agreement being kept.

The study is rated as medium confidence as it is a non-experimental design with partial description of the intervention. It does not control for selection bias.

Confidence assessment

Overall, the cell is rated low confidence because of the small number of studies and concerns on study design.

Other outcomes in the study/cell:

- Social cohesion/Willingness to participate or help