

USE OF AIR STRIKES IN CIVIL WARS: Evidence from two decades of conflict

In June 2019, the US government prepared to launch an air strike on Iran. Minutes before the strike, President Donald Trump cancelled the attack amid worries that the strike might cause 150 civilian casualties. He later explained his decision on Twitter: 'I didn't think it was proportionate.'

New research by **Nauro Campos**, and colleagues analyses the decision for or against air strikes in civil wars, based on a sample of 125 countries from 1989 to 2010. The findings suggest that while airborne weapons, especially attack helicopters, can quickly de-escalate civil conflict, they also demand a higher collateral in the form of civilian casualties. What's more, only a specific subset of governments would forgo the advantage of conducting air strikes if too many civil lives were at stake.

The study, which will be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Manchester in August 2019, starts with the question of what role a government's military capacity plays in the (de-)escalation of civil wars. It then explores how rebels react when the government uses attack helicopters; and how the political system of a country influences government use of deadly airborne attacks.

As a measure of military capacity, the researchers look at the types and amounts of heavy weapon systems in a nation's military. Given a fixed military budget, they compare governments that mainly invested in tanks or mortars, for example, to governments that preferred attack helicopters or fighter jets.

To address escalation and de-escalation of civil wars, they make use of a novel measure provided by Bluhm et al (2016) which divides civil conflicts into four different categories of intensity: peace; violent protests; armed conflict; and civil war. The objective is to understand the effect of each unique weapon category on the likelihood that a country switches between two conflict categories from one year to another.

The researchers find that attack helicopters are associated with a significant and unique advantage for governments to de-escalate civil wars faster. This finding does not depend on the conflict intensity from which a country starts.

For example, 100 additional attack helicopters in a nation's army make a direct de-escalation from a civil war with more than 1,000 battle deaths to peace 2% more likely. The average (unconditional) likelihood for this kind of de-escalation lies at less than 3%.

There is no such effect for any other weapon category. This leads to the conclusion that attack helicopters, which can access any terrain easily and detect rebel hideouts with high precision, offer an important advantage in fighting insurgencies.

The study then contrasts these findings with a second question: how do rebels react when the government uses attack helicopters? To see the rebels' response, they look at the type of terrain where fighting takes place inside a country's borders.

They find evidence that per 100 attack helicopters in a civil war, the odds of observing fighting in urban areas in the next year increase by about 30%. Hence, it seems likely that rebel groups adjust their behaviour by hiding in crowded areas instead of

mountains or forests to find protection from the government's airborne attacks.

This, of course, has consequences. There is evidence that attack helicopters increase the degree of indiscriminate violence, defined as the ratio of civilian deaths to combatant deaths. One hundred additional attack helicopters involved in a civil war increase the severity of indiscriminate violence by about 7%.

There is, however, significant heterogeneity among governments. Attack helicopters are only associated with more civil casualties in civil wars in intermediate political regimes. The relationship disappears for the most autocratic and the most democratic countries.

To interpret this finding, the authors suspect that both strong democracies and strong autocracies shy away from deadly airborne attacks because the people or the military will hold them accountable. This mechanism does not exist in intermediate systems in which rather short-lived leaders rule under malfunctioning checks and balances and unfree elections.

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