



INTRASTATE WARFARE

Date: October 15, 2020

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented throughout the evening and does not exclusively represent the views of the speaker or the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On October 15th, 2020, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS) Vancouver hosted its sixth Digital Roundtable event of the year, *Intrastate Warfare*. The presentation was conducted by guest speaker Dr. Arjun Chowdhury, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Chowdhury's presentation delivered a historical overview of types of conflicts, and a brief analysis on the patterns of conflicts and whether they have changed over a period of approximately 200 years, with a particular focus on the last 50 years. He described two types of war, interstate and intrastate, mentioning trends in intrastate war and the contrast to interstate war, as well as the consequences to life expectancy and infrastructure in the regions affected by intrastate wars. Subsequently, Dr. Chowdhury answered questions submitted by the attendees, which elaborated on the concepts of interstate and intrastate wars, using current examples such as, COVID-19, right-wing extremism, cybercrimes, and foreign aid.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Chowdhury focused on defining and explaining the concepts of interstate and intrastate wars, and also used data collected over a period of approximately 200 years to demonstrate trends and contrasts between them. Data utilized in the presentation showed an increasing trend in the number of intrastate wars. In the period of 1945 to 1999, there were five times more intrastate than interstate wars, five times more people killed in battle in intrastate wars than in interstate wars, and intrastate wars were twenty-four times longer than interstate wars (utilizing

the median length values for the comparison). The consequences of more lengthy conflicts are worse than those of shorter conflicts, and their impacts go beyond the conflict itself; they affect the region's infrastructure (supply chain, electricity, transportation) and life expectancy (spread of diseases, shortage of doctors and nurses, less education).

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Interstate wars can be short (median length = 3 months), or long (median length = 6 years). Research considering 200 years of data indicated that short interstate wars are not as deadly or violent as intrastate wars, and though they consist of 90% of the wars, they only accounted for a small percentage of casualties, 14%. Conversely, in the same period, the long interstate wars, i.e., 10% of wars (about 10 or 12 wars), accounted for 86% of all casualties.

Data have shown, however, that the number of interstate wars are decreasing and the number of intrastate conflicts are increasing. In a period of over 50 years (1945-1999), there were 127 intrastate conflicts, which is roughly five times more than the interstate wars analyzed in the same period (25 interstate wars). More importantly, intrastate wars were invariably longer than interstate wars (averaging 3 months): the median duration of intrastate wars is 7 years; the average duration of intrastate wars is 11 years. It is important to note that the average value being higher than the median usually indicates the presence of outliers in the higher end - e.g., Colombia, 50 years of civil war.

The lengthiness of intrastate wars leads to great costs to the lives of civilians, more so to non-combatants (women and children). The most prominent cost is the decrease in life expectancy as it is directly related to factors such as: a) a lack of vaccinations and/or an increased spread of infectious diseases with closed hospitals and clinics and a lack of health care workers; b) poor education and malnutrition, due to the breakdown in infrastructure and in the supply chain; meaning food, essential goods, and electricity are scarce.

Interstate wars, although less common, are potentially deadlier because of the destruction capacity of states, especially those with nuclear weapon technology. Conversely, intrastate wars are arguably more prevalent in the contemporary era; they are less intense in the sense that few people die on a daily basis in comparison to interstate wars, but they last longer. The long duration of intrastate

wars generate costs that go beyond those of the wars, especially to noncombatants women and children who have a decreased life expectancy.

Definition

- **Interstate:** two or more sovereign states fight. Generally, there is a declaration of war and a numerical threshold to define the conflict as a war, that is 1,000 battle deaths a year - e.g., Iran-Iraq war.
- **Intrastate:** a government fighting armed actors within its own borders. It is important to note though, that most intrastate conflicts have foreign state intervention. The numerical threshold to define the conflict as war is the same, 1,000 battle deaths a year - e.g., ethnic (Rwanda), and civil/revolutionary (Algeria).

Question Period

Discussion centered around modern-day conflict, transnational social movements, and potential law enforcement and government responses:

- The risk of death is arguably lower nowadays. Right-wing extremists (RWE) actors have much less destruction capacity in comparison to states. The most dangerous actors, states, are not fighting anymore.
- The drug war in Mexico, although it accounts for 30,000 deaths, it is not classified as intrastate war because it does not have the political aspect connected to it. Groups such as Shining Path, in Peru, and FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), in Colombia engage in intrastate wars. The rationale is, some rebel groups involved in trading illicit materials also finance intrastate wars.
- The intrastate wars in Africa and Asia, for example, are mainly related to land disputes and they tend to last longer in comparison to disputes in which the conflict is related to regime or government disagreement.
- Considering violence is arguably related to the government's inability to provide services, it is possible that COVID-19 contributes to an increase in civil violence; however, it may not necessarily take the form of intrastate war.
- Foreign aid does not seem effective. Because it provides unearned income, it can cause governments to be less accountable to their citizens which, in turn, might increase the risk of people becoming dissatisfied and fight their government.

- Cyberwarfare seems to be a tool and a substitute for direct combat, that is, an indirect way to destabilize the opposite party. In that sense, it has little effect in increasing or decreasing intrastate wars.
- Misinformation and rumors appear to be an important part of why individual violent events happen. However, they do not seem to be the cause for civil war, neither the reason why intrastate war lasts for as long as they do.
- Isolated acts by social movement actors arguably do not lead to intrastate wars. Generally, coordinated attacks on another large social group or government might lead to intrastate wars.
- The most significant predictor of a civil war is if there was one in the past decade or more, because of the lasting effects of a civil war, i.e., breakdown of infrastructure and supply chain, slow economic recovery, high unemployment rates, etc. This might increase grievance and the likelihood of civil unrest.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- There are 2 types of war, interstate and intrastate. Interstate wars involve two or more states and an average of 1,000 battle deaths per year. Intrastate wars involve governments and armed actors within their own borders. Intrastate wars can also be divided into ethnic and civil/revolutionary wars.
- Interstate conflicts have been diminishing from 1946-2008 and have been replaced by intrastate conflicts. Ethnic wars have also diminished from the 1990s onwards.
- Intrastate conflicts are much longer, with a median of 7 years and a mean of 11 years. They have also shifted from being centralized in Africa through the 1960s-1990s to being prominent in the Middle East after the 2010s.
- Intrastate wars have a cost on civilians, long after they are over. Infrastructure is damaged, diseases are spread, and long term impact is felt by women and children despite not being combatants. The lifespan of civilians is shortened due to intrastate war.
- Interstate wars are less common but much deadlier since the Napoleonic wars, with nuclear weapon devastation being a main factor. Intrastate wars are more prevalent, less intense, but much longer. The duration of intrastate wars is independent of the cause of conflict.



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