Swift and Sure: Assessing the Types of Military Force Leaders Use for Diversion

by

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Abstract
It is commonly assumed that leaders can be compelled to use interstate force to divert attention from domestic societal unrest or weakening economic performance. Unfortunately, the bulk of these analyses are plagued by conceptual, theoretical, and methodological limitations. Many operationalize the use of force as a single discrete event and overlook the fact that the use of force is a multifaceted phenomenon. Others rely on a single case, the USA, or perhaps a handful of democratic states. Most assume unidirectional causation among explanatory variables and diversionary force. This paper addresses the shortcomings of extant literature. First, using the Pearson-Baumann dataset of military interventions, the paper distinguishes different types of interstate force that could be used for diversionary purposes. These interventions include domestic (intervention to take side in domestic dispute), social (to protect a socio-ethnic faction or minority in the target country), rebel (to pursue rebel or terrorist forces), economic (to protect economic or resource interests of self or others), strategic (regional power balances, stability, or ideological issues mentioned by the intervener or clearly connected to the intervention), humanitarian (to save lives, relieve suffering, distribute foodstuffs to prevent starvation), territorial (to acquire or retain territory, delineate frontiers, or specify sovereign status), and diplomatic (to protect own military and/or diplomatic interests and property inside or outside the target). Second, it analyzes a sample of 150 countries from 1950 to 2000 using pool time series cross section methodology. Third, while the paper pays particular attention to the external use of force, it also scrutinizes the reciprocal relationships between these eight types of external use of force and declining domestic support and economic performance. The results suggest that declining support and weakening economic performance are more likely to explain some external uses of force than others. Likewise, some types of diversionary behaviors are more likely to have a stronger impact on domestic support and economic performance than others.

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