

Dynamics of Conflict

Editorial by

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The military conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, the terrorist threat and the deterioration of international relationships, but also trade wars and other less violent forms of international conflict remind us of the continued role of conflict in the international sphere. This special issue considers the dynamics of such conflicts, bringing together research from economics and political science that studies the factors why and how a conflict may escalate or cease, the role of sanctions, the role of mediation, the role of ethnic and religious diversity, and the international institutions such as the United Nations or of military alliances.

The Tug-of-War is one of the workhorse models of conflict and frequently used to describe multi-battle contests in economics, operations management, political science, and other disciplines. In their paper “The Tug-of-War in the Laboratory”, Deck and Sheremeta (2019) provide the first systematic experimental study of the tug-of-war and their results show notable deviations of behavior from theory derived under standard assumptions. In particular, subjects often bid less in the first battle of the tug-of-war and more in the follow-up battles than predicted by theory. These findings offer theorists and practitioners a deeper understanding of the limits of the Tug-of-War model and an inducement to refine the theory.

The decision to enter or start a contest is central to our understanding of conflict and these decisions are mired in uncertainty and based on incomplete information. In their paper, “Entry in contests with incomplete information: Theory and experiments” Rentschler and Aycinena (2019) develop a new theory of contests with private values in which potential contestants observe their value and the common opportunity cost of entry. The core result is a neutrality result: whether or not contestants are informed of the number of entrants prior to choosing their expenditures has no effect on entry or aggregate expenditures. The prediction is tested in the laboratory and they report that there is substantial over-entry in general but that entry is higher when contestants are informed.

Since Samuel P Huntington proposed his clash-of-civilizations hypothesis in the 1990s (Huntington, 1993) that cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world a lively debate has raged amongst scholars interested in conflict about its validity. The paper by Gokmen (2019), “Clash of Civilizations Demystified” offers the first statistical test of the hypothesis. He shows that countries belonging to different civilizations have a higher probability of interstate conflict before and after the Cold War period, but not during the Cold War. This is consistent with the clash-of-civilizations hypothesis. Importantly, he also demonstrates econometrically that during the post-Cold War period, the conflict line was along language not religious lines. This is an important caveat that enriches the class-of-civilizations hypothesis and warrants further research.