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BOOK REVIEWS

Small Wars, Big Data: The Information Revolution in Modern Conflict, by Eli Berman, Joseph H. Felter, and Jacob N. Shapiro. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 386.

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The puzzle Berman, Felter and Shapiro attempt to resolve in this book concerns the differences between asymmetric (i.e., where one side has a substantial material advantage) and symmetric conflict (i.e., conflict between relative peers in material capabilities) at the subnational level. Are asymmetric and symmetric conflicts determined by the same logic, or are there discreet factors in local phenomena? They conclude that particularly the outcomes of asymmetric conflicts are determined not just by state capacity (i.e., military forces and economic wealth), but also depending on how and where these resources are deployed. Furthermore, the salience of building relationships with local populations and the provision of information (i.e., intelligence) functions as an important mechanism by which counterinsurgencies succeed or fail. Consequently, the authors make an important contribution by developing an information-centric theory of explaining outcomes in insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. They argue that not only it is important to understand the tactics used by rebel and government forces, but more importantly

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that we must appreciate how these actors interact and exchange information with the civilian populations which are often caught in the middle of these conflicts.

An aspect of this book that should not be overlooked is the practical impact that the authors' backgrounds brings to policymakers and military planners. This is probably not a surprising development considering the practical “real-world” background they possess. Berman and Shapiro are both veterans and have contributed to counterterrorism planning and operations, while Felter has been involved in special operations duties. By leveraging on their hands-on experience, together the authors seamlessly weave it and their academic credentials into an elegant empirical investigation.

One of the many strengths of this book is the authors' understanding of the salience that space plays in subnational asymmetric conflict. With a nod to former U.S. Speaker of the House Tip O'Niell, the authors explicate how all conflict is a product of local political dynamics. The spatial turn toward disaggregated studies of subnational conflict (i.e., georeferenced conflict event data) has helped political scientists and others gain a better understanding of these processes, and this demonstrates the immense practical value of these studies. Beyond the benefit of analyzing localized conflict dynamics, disaggregated studies also enable us to examine the effects of apolitical data and geographic features which may be associated with our puzzles (e.g., rugged terrain, distribution of natural resources).

The authors' development of subnational georeferenced data and hypotheses linking insurgency and counterinsurgency outcomes to the civilian information networks is another important contribution to the policy and military community. Augmenting the efforts from important global and regional georeferenced datasets such as PRIO-GRID, UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED), Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), Geo-Referencing

Ethnic Power Relations (GeoEPR), and the Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD) among others, the authors utilize event data sources like the SIGACT reports of coalition forces. This event data allows the authors to examine nearly 200,000 conflict events and then aggregated at the district level of analysis for all districts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The fine grained detail of the authors' data allows for an excellent analysis which incorporates both the temporal and spatial dimensions of insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. Consequently, what their data and models add to the discussion of subnational conflict is the incorporation of what the authors call an information mechanism. The information mechanism conceptually recognizes the salient role that non-combatant civilian populations play in insurgency and counterinsurgency operations as a distributor of tactical intelligence to the two conflicting parties (i.e., the government and rebel forces). The incorporation of the information mechanism into their models demonstrates the great importance that real-time information and the development of trust plays in these types of conflicts.

The book's acknowledgement of the important role played by civilians is a major accomplishment of this study that should not be overlooked. While many studies have examined how conflict affects civilian populations, this study does an admirable job in incorporating civilians into the tripartite relationship between civilians, the forces of the state and those of an insurgency movement. Understanding this relationship, through the prism of the information mechanism, makes the contributions of this book stand out.

There are, however, some limitations to the data and analyses employed in this study. One such limitation is that the authors' data only include observations from conflicts in which the U.S. military was present. Consequently, conflict events wherein U.S. military forces were not present spatially or temporally are not in-

cluded. The data therefore cannot speak to a broader spectrum of conflict events. Additionally, the authors develop a series of policy-relevant propositions, but fail to investigate how the provision of services (by the government or rebel forces) affects a population's desire to provide information. These shortcomings, however, are fouls that the authors readily call on themselves and while their omission makes the reader want to explore these dimensions of their study, such an absence does not attenuate the excellent analyses contained herein.

This book provides an excellent and thoughtful analysis of a subject that continues to play an important role in global politics. The authors approach this task soberly and engage in both a theoretical and methodological pluralism that redounds to their credit. Taking many factors into account the authors demonstrate the complexity of the subject, and yet distill these complexities concerning localized conflict, economics, information mechanisms, and the roles played by civilians in this context into what is a captivating exploration of intrastate conflict for academics and policymakers.

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