

Chapter 7

Events, Patterns, and Analysis

Forecasting International Conflict in the Twenty-First Century

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1 INTRODUCTION

It seems like a lifetime ago, but if one looks back to the heady days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union, there was certainly a great deal of speculation that the world in general, and the United States in particular, would experience a significantly lower amount of conflict than was the case during the Cold War. In many ways, the world is a safer place than it was during that era, but a quick glance at the experience of the United States since the end of the Cold War will demonstrate that conflict has been an important part of US foreign policy:

- The United States has engaged in four significant military conflicts: the Gulf War, the NATO campaign against Kosovo, the conflict against Afghanistan that led to the overthrow of the Taliban, and the Iraq War of 2003.
- The United States has been the target of a number of significant terrorist attacks, culminating in the events of September 11, 2001. This prompted the President to begin a world-wide campaign against terrorist groups, most prominently Al Qaeda (including but not limited to the above mentioned campaign against Afghanistan).
- At the same time, North Korean actions that facilitated a re-starting of its nuclear weapons program and recent events in Iran might involve the US in significant military conflicts.

While this list includes the most important conflicts experienced by the United States, it by no means exhausts the significant conflicts throughout the

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world. Even if we restrict our attention to situations in which the current United States administration has taken a direct interest, at a minimum we would have to add the Israeli-Palestinian and Indian-Pakistani conflicts to the list. In short, despite the end of the Cold War, serious international conflicts—unfortunately—still exist.

A glance at the US conflict involvements shows that there are significant differences. The Gulf War featured both an air campaign and a ground campaign fought according to the doctrines of the US Air Force and the US Army. Kosovo is regarded by many as the first war decided by airpower alone. In the campaign in Afghanistan, a combination of indigenous opposition groups, selective air strikes, and US ground forces prevailed. Finally, the Iraq War was a swift blitzkrieg followed by a significant—and continuing—insurgency involving a continuing large-scale US presence.

While there were major differences in how each of these conflicts was prosecuted, there is one thing they have in common. Despite the unparalleled intelligence capabilities of the US government, to a significant extent, each situation (except the Iraq War) was unanticipated by US decision makers.

If the onset of serious conflicts can often surprise the US government, one can only assume that individuals, groups, organizations, and other states throughout the world (with fewer intelligence resources) are even more unlikely to anticipate conflicts. If conflicts cannot be anticipated, what chance do we have to prevent or stop them? Consequently, we see many uses for an increased ability to anticipate the outbreak of serious conflict.

This is the goal of our research: to improve the ability to anticipate serious international conflict. We will use a combination of online media sources, analytic techniques, and knowledge derived from research in international conflict to achieve this goal. Since we are at the beginning stages of our research, we are not in a position to present enough information to allow for a final judgment of our approach. However, we can provide enough of a descriptive to allow the reader to develop a good sense of what we propose to do, and to draw a preliminary conclusion about its worth.

2 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Any research in international conflict is guided by a conceptualization of the process by which it develops. Some researchers make this conceptualization very explicit through the use of formal theory. There are other researchers (usually traditionalists) who claim that they look at “everything,” but this is misleading. They are guided by informal (and often unrecognized) conceptualizations. We believe that it is always better to make these conceptualizations