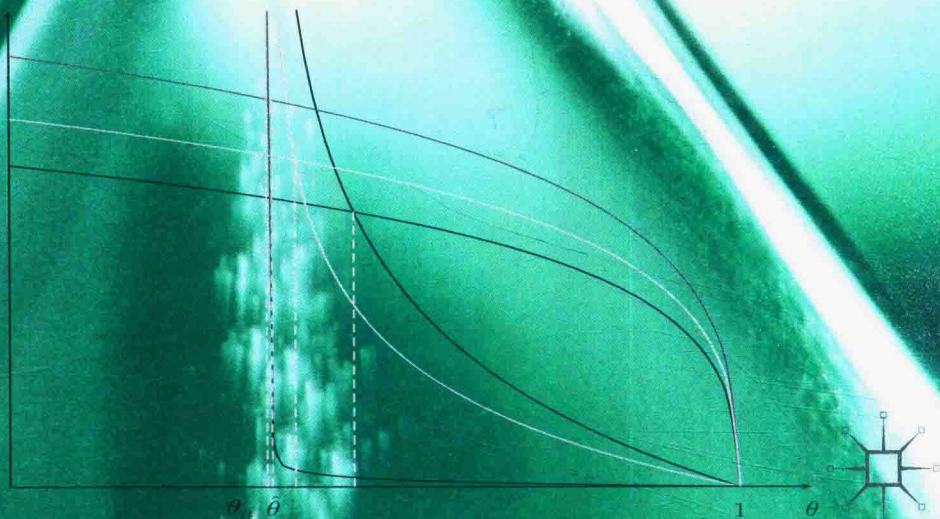


Dynamics of Asymmetric Territorial Conflict

The Evolution of Patience

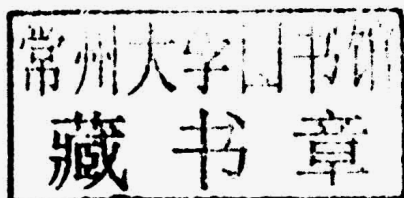
Uri Resnick



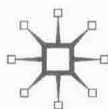
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The Evolution of Patience

Uri Resnick



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Dynamics of Asymmetric Territorial Conflict

*The book is dedicated to my wife and sons, Tali, Yehonatan,
and Itamar. They've earned it.*

They also serve who only stand and wait.

John Milton

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1

Mind and Matter: Material Foundations of Ideational Change

Ideas can be very elusive things. Unseen, they nevertheless leave decidedly visible traces on human behavior. They lend meaning to our observations, while at the same time leaving us inescapably befuddled as to what these meanings mean. They frame our choices, express our predilections and articulate our expectations, hopes and fears. Nothing really makes sense without them. And yet, we have little understanding of how they form, what mechanisms, if any, govern their development and how they affect the behavior to which they are so inextricably, if largely inexplicably, linked. In short, they present a rather intriguing puzzle.

Nowhere is this puzzle more pronounced than in the context of conflict studies and international relations. Debates as to the relative importance or usefulness of treating ideas (non-material factors) as independent causes of behavior have been the subject of much scholarly controversy. Do ideas, thus defined, matter or is it enough to know the distribution of material capabilities –military and economic –to gain a sound understanding of conflict patterns? For example, do we have to ‘take preferences seriously’, or can we be satisfied with a view that sees them as essentially uniform and superficial derivatives of the structure of the international system?

The question is especially pertinent to one of the most fundamental aspects of world politics: changing power structures and their relationship with changing state behavior. Ever since Thucydides analyzed the Peloponnesian War as an offshoot of a fundamental transition in geopolitical power, scholars have understood that the very fabric of global politics is closely related to configurations and shifts in relative power. There has similarly been a remarkably keen awareness, since

the writings of antiquity, of the key role of non-material factors in this regard. Countless authors, from Plato to Machiavelli to Hans Morgenthau, have noted the importance of national morale, spiritual fortitude and steadfastness, as components of national power. Many have provided elaborate descriptions of how such ideational factors change and how such changes influence the overall configuration of relative power between states. Few have offered *explanations* of such ideational changes. This book does.

There is a growing consensus among scholars that ideas need to be taken into account in any convincing attempt to understand what drives patterns of war and peace. Attempts to explain conflict solely in terms of material variables, while often capturing important insights, have proven incomplete. While empirical research has revealed significant relationships between material variables and conflict behavior, there remains substantial residual variance in conflict, which capabilities seem unable to explain. Simply put, behavior often changes even when material capabilities do not. Why?

Clearly, ideas must be playing a role. Yet, our understanding of the inter-relationships between material and ideational factors remains rudimentary. Much of the work on the role of ideas as factors which influence conflict is descriptive in nature. Few have attempted to explain how ideas change or why. Rare indeed have been the attempts to trace relationships which might generally characterize the interface between material constraints and ideas. Asymmetric territorial conflicts provide a fascinating focus for examining this interface.

Asymmetric conflict—that is, conflict between rivals of widely disparate capabilities—is puzzling. Parties to such conflicts often display dramatically changing behavior over time, despite the fact that their relative capabilities usually change very little. Thus, in seeking to explain such changing behavior, our focus is naturally directed towards non-material factors.

Many asymmetric territorial conflicts follow a common pattern, whereby a state initially seizes control of a particular territory, holding on to it for a prolonged period, only to eventually relinquish it to its local inhabitants, often following violent attempts by the latter to extract territorial concessions. This is the basic temporal progression of most cases of European expansion beyond the European continent, whether commencing in the fifteenth century in North and Latin America and Asia or in the nineteenth century in Africa. Moreover, it also seems to capture the basic progression of other cases of territorial aggrandizement and eventual contraction, such as the rise and fall of the

Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Soviet empires. Cases of imperial expansion and contraction in antiquity, such as that of Rome, Persia, Macedonia and successive Sinic dynastic empires, seem to correspond, at least roughly, to the same basic pattern. There are hints of it too in instances of separatist or irredentist conflict within a host of multi-ethnic states.

Though imperial states often experience some decline in their military and economic capabilities, the overall balance of material power between them and their territorial acquisitions usually does not change enough to merit, in and of itself, the dramatic move of complete withdrawal. The basic underlying process appears to be no less, and perhaps more, ideational than material in nature.

A common thread of thought in this regard has pointed to asymmetries in motivation between rivals. A rival that is much weaker than its counterpart in terms of military, economic or demographic capabilities might compensate for this weakness through its motivation or resolve, particularly if there are important differences in the way the contested issue is viewed by the rivals. For example, national movements fighting for a homeland thousands of kilometers from a colonial state's own homeland might make up for their relative weakness with superior tenacity and endurance. Others have pointed to changing international norms or changing preferences as underlying changes in conflict behavior.

Unfortunately, existing work in this vein suffers from a central weakness: rarely have scholars offered endogenous explanations for changing ideas. Typically, it is argued that behavior changes because ideas change. Few have attempted to explain why ideas change as and when they do. Those attempts that have been made to explain changing ideas tend to be descriptively rich accounts which involve as many 'explanatory' degrees of freedom as the phenomenon being explained. Consequently, these 'explanations' are scarcely distinguishable from descriptions of changing ideas.

In this study, I construct a formal model that offers a parsimonious explanation of changing ideas, which is endogenous to the capability balance between rivals. In so doing, I offer a possible answer to the puzzle of why behavior in asymmetric conflicts varies as it does, despite what is typically a relatively stable distribution of capabilities between the rivals. The explanation points to changes in the rivals' attitudes towards time as being key factors that influence their behavior.

That is, the notion of 'patience' –the relative weight placed by an individual (or society) on the present vis à vis the future, represented

formally by the concept of a discount factor – is integral, in my view, to understanding the behavior of societies engaged in a territorial dispute. Two main insights revolving around this concept are imbued in the model I propose: (1) *There is a basic equivalence between a preference for making a concession and 'impatience'; the two are behaviorally indistinguishable.* (2) *A phenomenon exists, whereby satisfaction breeds impatience and dissatisfaction breeds patience; powerful/satisfied societies will lose patience over time, while weak/dissatisfied societies will gain patience over time.*

The basic intuition underlying the second claim is that in a population which is satisfied in the present, and given an uncertain future, evolutionary pressure will diminish the proportion of individuals who place 'too much weight' on the future, causing such a society to 'lose patience', on average, over time. Precisely the opposite can be expected for a population which is dissatisfied in the present. Equally important, when present conditions and future expectations are equivalent, evolutionary pressure is expected to vanish. Thus, a territorial change that simultaneously equalizes both rivals' present and future 'payoffs' brings the evolutionary process to a halt. I argue, based on the structure of the proposed model, that just such a territorial change can be expected at some point. Also, since violence cannot be sustained in equilibrium in the model, it is expected to be relatively rare. If it occurs at all, it is most likely to erupt in proximity to the single expected territorial change.

This phenomenon offers an explanation for the process in which a long period of stability culminates in a relatively brief 'spasm' of territorial concessions, and return to stability thereafter, where violence is relatively rare overall, and is usually initiated by the weak rival just prior to the territorial concessions. In contrast with most existing treatments of such phenomena, which remain limited to either static or essentially descriptive, correlative accounts, the model I propose offers an endogenous explanation for changing behavior (and ideas), and provides an explanation for the tendency of asymmetric territorial rivalries to converge to stable outcomes, through a well-specified process of interaction.

To assess the extent to which the ostensible pattern actually recurs in asymmetric territorial conflicts, I conduct an empirical study of 389 territorial rivalries, primarily spanning the 1816–2000 period, and extending further into the past where applicable. Including rivalries between states as well as rivalries involving a non-state entity, I have found that the pattern of prolonged stability, followed by relatively brief territorial change and return to stability, is indeed common among asymmetric territorial rivals. Wide-scale violence, quite rare overall, typically occurs

in proximity to the territorial concessions of the more powerful rival. These patterns stand in contrast to the more uniformly distributed territorial changes and eruptions of violence that are typically witnessed in symmetric rivalries.

Regrettably, patience itself is unobservable and essentially unmeasurable. Thus, to shed some light on those aspects of the model which are not amenable to quantitative analysis, I conduct a qualitative inquiry into the Israeli-Palestinian case, one of the better-known instances of asymmetric territorial conflict. Focusing on trends within Palestinian and Israeli society over the last few decades concerning attitudes towards time, this inquiry reveals remarkable similarities to the process described by the mathematical model.

The model, though essentially descriptive in nature, can be used to suggest prescriptive conclusions. Thus, I consider a number of possible policy implications, some of which may run counter to conventional wisdom.

Territorial conflict is only one specific context in which the phenomenon of evolving patience can play a role. In fact, *any* protracted competition between imbalanced rivals is likely to have a similar dynamic structure. The endogenous relationship between relative capabilities and patience is a very basic one. It provides an explanation for what many scholars, from antiquity to the present, have observed as the respective spiritual decline or ascension within materially ascendant and subordinate societies. The latter, in turn, have long been understood as a key component of power transitions, or what may be somewhat cavalierly referred to as the rise and fall of states and empires. The model of evolving patience helps to explain the ideational aspects of such fundamental restructurings of world politics.

In so doing, it sheds light on the more general question of the interplay between material and ideational factors and the manner in which they jointly influence behavior. It is largely accepted today that ideas must be taken into account as having independent influence on conflict behavior. This study advances our understanding of how such influences operate.