

Approximating the Optimal Negotiating Behavior of Terrorist Groups

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Although understanding the negotiating behavior of terrorist groups constitutes a significant asset in managing contemporary conflicts, granular data on how a terrorist group negotiates is hard to obtain. To address this problem, we develop a model that approximates the optimal negotiating behavior of a terrorist group based on the degree of centralization or decentralization of the group's organizational structure. We first estimate the terrorist group's organizational structure from the distribution of casualties of the group's attacks. Assuming a rational actor model, we then derive the optimal negotiating behavior of the terrorist group from its reward-maximizing organizational adaptation over time. Our model establishes a novel understanding between how terrorists engage in negotiations, pursue organizational adaptation, and concurrently select tactics on the battlefield. Empirically, we apply our model to the Afghan Taliban based on attack data for 2004–2019. Our results show that although the Taliban have become relatively centralized since the emergence of the Afghan peace talks in late 2017, irregular spikes of decentralization in the group's organizational structure indicate a volatile negotiating behavior. We analyze these patterns to develop a range of policy proposals for engaging the Taliban in the talk-and-fight environment of Afghanistan.