H-Diplo | ISSF

**Article Review 86**
**issforum.org**

H-Diplo/ISSF Editors: **Seth Offenbach** and **Diane Labrosse**
H-Diplo/ISSF Web and Production Editor: **George Fujii**

---

**Shiping Tang, Yihan Xiong, and Hui Li. "Does Oil Cause Ethnic War? Comparing Evidence from Process-Tracing with Quantitative Results."** *Security Studies* 26:3 (2017): 359-390. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1306392.

Review by **Emily Meierding**, Naval Postgraduate School

Published by ISSF on 10 October 2017

http://tiny.cc/ISSF-AR86
https://issforum.org/articlereviews/86-oil-ethnic-war
https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-AR86.pdf

---

Shiping Tang, Yihan Xiong, and Hui Li's recent article, "Does Oil Cause Ethnic War? Comparing Evidence from Process-Tracing with Quantitative Results," is a companion piece to another article, by Hui and Tang, published in the *Chinese Political Science Review*: "Location, Location, and Location: The Ethno-Geography of Oil and the Onset of Civil War."[1] That article evaluates the authors' theoretical argument—that oil's presence in a subordinate minority group's core territory encourages ethnic war—using statistical analyses. This new article assesses the same argument, including the causal mechanisms underpinning it, using qualitative case studies. It concludes that "oil has rarely been a deep cause of ethnic war" (359). "Does Oil Cause Ethnic War" also aims to evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative methods, thereby contributing to an ongoing debate in political science/international relations.

The question of whether oil causes civil war has attracted a great deal of attention among conflict researchers. As Tang et al. observe, natural resources were a central feature of early quantitative analyses of civil wars.[2] Authors such as Macartan Humphreys and Michael Ross also identified and evaluated causal mechanisms that

[1] Li Hui and Shiping Tang, "Location, Location, and Location: The Ethno-geography of Oil and the Onset of Civil War," *Chinese Political Science Review* 2 (2017): 135-158.

[2] Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "On the Economic Causes of Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 50:4 (1998): 563-573; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97:1 (2003): 75-90.

could link resource endowments to armed conflict.[3] Other researchers, including Philippe Le Billon, focused on the geography of resources, demonstrating that different locations and resource types affect the form and frequency of intra-state contention.[4] More recently, authors have integrated ethnic politics into their conflict analyses, examining how resource and ethnic geography intersect to provoke internal violence.[5]

The shortcomings of these studies, Tang et al. assert, is that some do not focus exclusively on oil, while others examine the wrong petroleum-related variables, including oil income, oil rents, oil production, and oil concentration (360). Moreover, they observe, most of these studies consist exclusively of quantitative, statistical analyses. Since statistical models only assess correlations, they cannot evaluate the causal mechanisms linking oil endowments to intra-state conflict. As a result, these analyses run the risk of false positives: identifying conflicts as being oil-driven based on geographical overlap between resources and conflict, rather than on actual causal connections (363-64). Qualitative methods, the authors assert, can overcome these limitations. However, they are also critical of previous case study-based research, noting that much of it is not comparative or theory-driven. Two exceptions—Ross's "medium-N" analysis of the causal mechanisms linking natural resources and civil war and Edward Aspinall's examination of resource-related conflicts in Indonesia—are also critiqued. Ross, the authors assert, examines each of his thirteen cases too briefly, and Aspinall's study is not cross-national (364).[6]

Tang et al.'s theoretical argument is intuitively compelling. They assert that oil's "ethnogeographical location" is related to the onset of ethnic wars (360). When oil is located in a subordinate minority group's core territory, the resource is associated with ethnic conflict. In contrast, when oil is located in a dominant majority group's core territory or in areas that are ethnically diverse, oil does not encourage contention (360). The authors also outline two causal mechanisms that connect oil's ethnogeographical location to conflict onset. First, after oil is discovered in a minority group's core territory, the state attempts to strengthen its control over the region in order to prevent secessionist rebellions that would separate the oil-rich territory from the central state. Second, this "internal colonization" process becomes a "powerful rallying point" for local resistance along ethnic lines (365). Three sub-mechanisms encourage ethnic mobilization in oil-endowed areas. First, since the minority population regards local oil resources as its own, it views the state's activities as stealing, which generates resentment. Second, oil discoveries encourage immigration of skilled workers, who monopolize employment in the petroleum industry, breeding additional local grievances. Third, oil

[3] Macartan Humphreys, "Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: Uncovering the Mechanisms," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49:4 (2005): 508-537; Michael L. Ross, "How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from 13 Cases," *International Organization* 58:1 (2004): 35-67.

[4] Philippe Le Billon, "The Political Ecology of War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts," *Political Geography* 20:5 (2001): 561-584.

[5] Victor Asal et al., "Political Exclusion, Oil, and Ethnic Armed Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60:8 (2016): 1343-1367; Hui and Tang, "Location, Location, and Location"; Philipp Hunziker and Lars-Erik Cederman, "No Extraction Without Representation: The Ethno-regional Oil Curse and Secessionist Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 54:3 (2017): 365-81; Massimo Morelli and Dominic Rohner, "Resource Concentration and Civil Wars," *Journal of Development Economics* 117:1 (2015): 32-47.

[6] Edward Aspinall, "The Construction of Grievance: Natural Resources and Identity in a Separatist Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51:6 (2007): 950-972; Ross, "Evidence from 13 Cases."

exploitation causes environmental degradation, usually without compensation, precipitating further resentment (366).

To evaluate these causal mechanisms and sub-mechanisms, Tang et al. conduct five comparative case studies, using within-case process tracing. Two of the cases—conflicts in Aceh and Sudan—are "positive pathway cases"; oil was discovered in a subordinate minority group's territory and ethnic conflict followed. One case, Gabon, is a "negative pathway case" (a "true negative," in the authors' words); the countries' ethnic groups are broadly geographically distributed, so, while the country possesses abundant oil, it has not experienced ethnic conflict. Two other cases—conflicts in Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh—are negative cases, either lacking oil in the subordinate minority group's territory (Nagorno-Karabakh) or lacking a causal oil–ethnic conflict connection (Chechnya). As Tang et al. observe, the latter two conflicts are frequently falsely identified as positive cases, particularly in quantitative analyses of oil and civil wars (370).

The case studies purport to find support for the proposed causal mechanisms and, indeed, both the Aceh and Sudan cases involve oil discoveries, followed by state-led internal colonization processes and local resistance, mobilized around petroleum-related grievances. The authors also claim, based on their analyses, that "oil has never been a deep cause of ethnic war" (360). Instead, Tang et al. assert, "the discovery of oil within the core territory of a subordinate minority group either reignites dormant conflicts that have deeper roots in ethnic resentment and hatred (underpinned by long period of ethnic domination and earlier episodes of ethnic conflict) or intensifies ongoing conflicts…" (360). In effect, minority groups' longstanding ethnic hostility is the tinder for later contention and oil discoveries the spark.

I am sympathetic to this claim, as my own research on oil and interstate conflict finds that countries that spar over oil usually share a history of hostility that predates petroleum discoveries.[7] However, Tang et al.'s qualitative analysis does not justify their expansive conclusions. Nor do the case studies fully accomplish the authors' stated goals, in conducting a qualitative analysis: that is, to evaluate their proposed causal mechanisms, examine the context of oil–conflict relationships, and highlight the danger of false positives in purely quantitative analyses. This ambitious agenda causes the authors to spread their case studies too thin, especially in regard to their first goal: assessing causal mechanisms.

Of Tang et al.'s five cases, only three (Aceh, Sudan, and Chechnya) are suited to assessing causal mechanisms, because these are the only cases in which oil is present in a subordinate minority group's core territory. These three cases also reveal that the authors' theory is underspecified. Although the Aceh and Sudan studies demonstrate that oil discoveries can encourage ethnic civil wars by precipitating internal colonization and facilitating ethnic mobilization, the Chechnya case indicates that these causal mechanisms are not universal. In the Chechnya case, oil was discovered in an ethnic minority's core territory, but was not a trigger for ethnic conflict.

We are therefore left with a question: when does Tang et al.'s causal progression occur? What factors condition the relationship between oil discoveries and ethnic conflict? Happily, the Chechnya case study hints at a possible omitted variable that could determine whether oil discoveries precipitate ethnic conflict: oil's importance. As the authors note, even at its peak in the 1970s, Chechnya's oil production constituted only

[7] Emily Meierding, "Do Countries Fight Over Oil" in Thijs Van de Graaf et al., eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of the International Political Economy of Energy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 441-460.

7% of Russia's petroleum output (378). Consequently, the region's oil was never as important to Russia as Aceh's natural gas was to Indonesia or southern Sudan's oil was to northern Sudan. Absent this exceptional value, oil discoveries did not trigger ethnic civil war.

Another underspecified variable, in Tang et al.'s theory, is existing ethnic hostility. In the study's two positive cases, Aceh and Sudan, oil-related conflicts were preceded by severe ethnic conflicts. The first Acehnese rebellion (1953-59) lasted six years and resulted in thousands of civilian fatalities, while Sudan's first civil war (1955-72) lasted seventeen years and killed half a million people. Moreover, neither of these conflicts was resolved to the ethnic minority group's lasting satisfaction. Consequently, in both locales, minority groups sustained intense ethnic acrimony, which could later be enflamed by oil discoveries. This finding leads one to wonder: how much tinder must ethnic hostility provide in order for oil to trigger a violent ethnic conflict? Tang et al. assert that oil discoveries can also trigger ethnic war in countries with "lower levels of ethnopolitics" (387). Yet, the positive cases they have selected (Aceh, Sudan) give us no way to adjudicate this claim, since neither displays low levels of ethnopolitics.

The historical record, in contrast, suggests at least one obvious case for testing Tang et al.'s assertion: Nigeria. The state was a British colonial amalgamation, containing three regionally dominant ethnic groups: the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. Before the country's independence in 1960, tensions regarding the state's eventual federal structure were high. Southerners, including the Igbo, feared domination by the Hausa-Fulani. Yet, prior to the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in 1956, in the midst of core Igbo territory, these tensions produced little outright violence.[8] Nonetheless, in the subsequent Biafran War (1967-1970), the Igbo and other eastern minority groups attempted to violently secede from Nigeria, taking the country's oil resources with them. This case suggests that oil can trigger ethnic civil wars, even in states that do not experience serious ethnic conflicts prior to petroleum discoveries. However, it also begs the question: was oil merely the trigger for the Biafran War, and ethnic animosity the conflict's "fundamental cause," consistent with Tang et al.'s claims? Or, did oil play a more significant causal role in the Nigerian civil war? By examining a hard case, like the Biafran War, and demonstrating that oil was merely a trigger for violence, rather than a foundational cause, Tang et al. would strengthen their conclusions about petroleum's limited causal contribution to ethnic conflict.

These observations are linked to my final critique: that Tang et al.'s qualitative analysis does not evaluate the appropriate cases to justify their assertion that "oil has never been a deep cause of ethnic war" (360). Only two of the authors' five cases, Aceh and Sudan, can evaluate oil's causal impact on conflict onset because the other three either lack the authors' independent variable of interest (oil in a minority region) or lack oil-triggered ethnic wars. In addition, the Aceh and Sudan cases are not hard cases or crucial cases for assessing the authors' argument; they are merely described as "pathway cases" that illustrate Tang et al.'s proposed causal progression.[9] Hence, any conclusions that the article draws from them should be more circumspect.

[8] One exception was four days of rioting in Kano in 1953. "The Kano Riots," *The Spectator*, 22 May 1953. Accessed at http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/22nd-may-1953/3/the-kano-riots.

[9] On selecting hard cases and crucial cases for process-tracing, see Frank Schimmelfennig, "Efficient Process Tracing: Analyzing the Causal Mechanisms of European Integration," in Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, eds., *Process Tracing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Moreover, a closer examination of the Aceh case calls Tang et al.'s proposed causal pathway into question. The authors accurately observe that Aceh's first natural gas discovery, of the Arun field, occurred in 1971, well after the country's first ethnic insurgency (1953-1959). They therefore claim that Aceh's subsequent insurgency (1976-2005), though triggered partly by natural gas, was fundamentally driven by existing ethnic animosity. The authors also present the first Acehnese rebellion as evidence that Aceh was capable of experiencing ethnic conflict, without petroleum (372-375, 383). Yet, while the first rebellion occurred prior to natural gas discoveries, it occurred well after the region's initial oil discovery. The Royal Dutch oil company sought concessions in Aceh in the late 1800s and the region was producing petroleum by the early 1900s. This production continued into the 1950s; refineries in the province of North Sumatra were "dependent" on Acehnese oil.[10] Consequently, it is possible that both the state-led internal colonization process that occurred in Aceh after Indonesia incorporated the region into North Sumatra in 1951, and the 1953 rebellion, were fundamentally caused by oil. This possibility turns Tang et al.'s causal progression on its head and, by upending one of their two key cases, casts doubt on their article's core findings.[11]

Tang et al.'s effort to re-evaluate their quantitative results, using process-traced case studies, is laudable. I appreciate their commitment to delving deeper into the relationship between oil and ethnic war and to valorizing qualitative methods, in a heavily quantitative field of study. However, by trying to make five cases accomplish so much, the authors undercut the validity of their core findings and reveal the gaps in their theoretical argument. In effect, Tang et al.'s ambitions inadvertently undermine their attempt to highlight the strengths of case study-based research.

Nonetheless, I suspect that, with an alternative case selection method, Tang et al. would find significant support both for their proposed causal mechanisms and their assertion that oil is more often a trigger than a fundamental cause of ethnic conflict. In addition, their cases offer insights into how the field can move forward in theorizing oil–ethnic conflict connections: for example, by incorporating an intervening variable measuring oil's importance and by specifying the level of existing ethnic animosity required for oil discoveries to trigger an ethnic war. Finally, the article unintentionally suggests a promising methodological *via media*: the return to medium-N analyses.[12] Although the authors rightly highlight the challenge of presenting more than a small number of comparative case studies, especially within a single journal article, there is no better way to reach generalizable conclusions about causal mechanisms.

[10] Paul H. Kratoska, ed. *South East Asia, Colonial History, Volume 2: Empire-Building in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2001), 140; J. Thomas Lindblad, "Economic Aspects of the Dutch Expansion in Indonesia, 1870-1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 23:1 (1989): 1-24; Nazaruddin Sjamsuddin, *The Republican Revolt: A Study of the Acehnese Rebellion* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), 38.

[11] The first rebellion may not have been oil-driven; however, to make their case study more compelling, Tang et al. should address this possibility.

[12] This could include qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) or more conventional case studies, such as those that appear in Ross, "Evidence from 13 Cases."

**Emily Meierding** is an Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. Her research on international energy conflict and cooperation has appeared in *Security Studies* and *Energy Research & Social Science.* She is currently completing a book on the "oil wars myth."

**©2017 The Authors |** Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License