



Strategic Developments in the ACLED Dataset

What are 'strategic developments'? How are they useful, and how should I use them?

'Strategic developments' are useful for understanding the *context of conflict and disorder*, and as such are a useful tool for ACLED users. This category is designed to capture contextually important events and developments that are not political violence outright. These events may, however, contribute to a state's political history and/or may trigger future political violence and/or protests.

The 'strategic developments' event type within the ACLED dataset is unique from other event types in that it captures significant developments beyond both physical violence directed at individuals or armed groups as well as demonstrations involving the physical congregation of individuals. *Because what types of events may be significant varies by context as well as over time, these events are, by definition, not systematically coded.* One action may be significant in one country at a specific time yet a similar action in a different country or even in the same country during a different time period might not have the same significance. This means that **'strategic developments' should not be assumed to be cross-context and -time comparable as other ACLED event types can be.**

Rather, **'strategic developments' ought to be used as a means to better understand analysis you are conducting as a user.** When used correctly, these events can be a useful tool in better understanding the landscape of disorder within a certain context. You can think of them as a way to annotate a graph: to make better sense of trends you see in the data.

For example, **'strategic developments' can shed light on why you might see a sudden increase in political violence or protests.** In this way, they could be used as potential **'early warning'** signs.

- In **Palestine**, ACLED codes the seizure of land and the demolition of Palestinian homes by Israeli forces and/or settlers. These events often contribute to spontaneous violence by crudely- or unarmed Palestinian groups in response. *These events are coded under sub-event type 'looting/property destruction'.*
- In **Somalia**, ACLED codes looting in the form of stealing animals, cars and other property. These infractions will often be triggers for communal or clan-based violence soon thereafter, primarily motivated by revenge, which can include the destruction of suspects' village and other related violence. *These events are coded under sub-event type 'looting/property destruction'.*



- In **Syria**, ACLED's coding of agreements has been important in tracking localized surrender and evacuation agreements. When the regime initiates talks with local rebels/reconciliation leaders, it indicates areas the regime/allies have identified as a strategic location to regain from rebels. If negotiations do not quickly result in a surrender agreement, it is nearly certain that there will be heavy violence/siege in these locations to force an agreement – a strategy which has been extremely effective thus far. *These events are coded under sub-event type 'agreement'.*
- In **Asia**, ACLED codes attacks on religious sites or the business establishments of minorities.¹ These attacks often trigger counter-protests and demonstrations. *These events are coded under sub-event type 'looting/property destruction'.*

'Strategic developments' can also help to clarify why you might see a decrease in political violence and protests. This is especially important so that a lack of events is not incorrectly interpreted to mean 'peace'.

- In **Ethiopia**, the state of emergency announced in late 2016 was coded as a security measure. It resulted in a sudden diminishing of events as state forces enforced security nationwide, imposing restrictions on the freedom of speech and access to information. *These events are coded under sub-event type 'change to group/activity'.*
- In **Yemen**, ACLED codes intercepted missiles and defused landmines, IEDs, and explosive-laden boats targeting warships. Each defusal results in one less remote violence event being recorded. Given the persistent threat that landmines pose for civilians especially, this has ramifications for the local population, as well as the conflict landscape. *These events are coded under sub-event type 'disrupted weapons use'.*

'Strategic developments' can be helpful in understanding shifts in dynamics or spatial patterns within a conflict. This can provide useful insight beyond the sheer number of conflict events or reported fatalities.

- In **Syria**, ACLED codes changes to armed groups, which sheds light on shifting dynamics within the war. This has been good way of understanding shifting rebel alliances within the Syrian Civil War – capturing rebel infighting, noting when new alliances arise, as well as tracking how major rebel alliances have formed even larger umbrella groups or joined forces in preparation for a possible regime/allied offensive. *These events are coded under sub-event type 'change to group/activity'.*
- In **Syria**, ACLED also codes the movement of forces, which is helpful in understanding changes to spatial patterns within the conflict. The movement of

¹ If there are reports of harm to civilians, these are coded as 'violence against civilians'; only cases in which civilians are not harmed, and destruction is carried out as intimidation are coded as 'strategic development' events.



forces is a good indicator of shifting battlefronts – specifically when specific groups/alliances are deployed to new areas or additional forces are deployed to a front in preparation for new or renewed offensives – and can help in understanding the territorial presence of difference groups and how groups may be used in offensives. *These events are coded under sub-event type ‘change to group/activity’.*

- In **Myanmar**, ACLED coded the burning down of villages in the context of the Rohingya crisis.² As military forces would often enter a village, burn it down, and then move on, this became an unfortunate way to understand shifts in the spatial patterns of this conflict agent within the context of the crisis. *These events are coded under sub-event type ‘looting/property destruction’.*

Lastly, **‘strategic developments’ can help the user to better understand the conflict environment through accounting for grievances and hostilities bubbling ‘beneath the surface’.** Such nuance is not reported by other conflict datasets, especially those with thresholds based on casualties. These events can help to shed light on ongoing disorder that does not necessarily manifest as outright physical violence.

- In **Asia**, ACLED codes the destruction of the homes and offices of political opponents; this is especially common in the lead up to elections. Such events help to paint the picture of what a pre-election environment, for example, may look like and sheds light on election turnout and results, as well as violence before and after it. *These events are coded under sub-event type ‘looting/property destruction’.*
- In **Zimbabwe**, similarly, ACLED coded the burning down of people’s homes in the lead up to the 2008 election.³ This intimidation strategy played a large role in impacting the pre-election environment in the country. *These events are coded under sub-event type ‘looting/property destruction’.*
- In **Thailand**, ACLED codes the destruction of infrastructure, such as telecommunication towers, which is a commonly used strategy by Muslim separatists in the south. These attacks contribute to the separatists’ strategies in engaging with the state, and point to the fact that disorder in that sub-region continues. This is similar to in **India**, where Naxal rebels use the destruction of public infrastructure as a retribution for losses in previous battles. *These events are coded under sub-event type ‘looting/property destruction’.*
- In **Nepal**, property destruction and defusal help to better understand ongoing militant violence. Very few battles are recorded between Communist rebels and

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state forces in Nepal. However, attacks on infrastructure and the planting of bombs (which are often defused by state agents) are proof of ongoing militancy in the country. *These events are coded under sub-event type 'looting/property destruction' or 'disrupted weapons use', respectively.*

Understanding what 'strategic developments' can offer and how to use them (and not use them) can make use of the ACLED dataset even more helpful for users.