



Article

Territorial Dispute Initiation by Weaker States

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Abstract

While territorial disputes have long been considered essential in the study of inter-state conflict, the existing literature has largely overlooked the actual initiation of territorial disputes in the first place. The conventional wisdom holds that, given that the anticipated consequences of dispute escalation are likely to be worse for weaker states than for stronger states, the former should be less likely than the latter to initiate a dispute. However, a large proportion of territorial disputes have in fact been initiated by weaker states. Why does a weaker state initiate a territorial claim over its relatively stronger counterpart? Drawing insights from the work on reputation building in the recent inter- and intra-state conflict literature, this article provides an explanation that focuses on the role of information and uncertainty in the initiation of territorial disputes. A potential weaker challenging state's decision to initiate a territorial dispute against a relatively stronger state depends upon information about whether or not the potential stronger target has made concessions in past disputes, and whether or not the potential stronger target may be expected to do so again in the future. Using Bayesian logistic regression, my analysis of the territorial dispute claims from 1816 to 2001 confirms that weaker states are more likely to initiate territorial disputes if potential stronger target states have yielded in previous disputes, and if potential stronger target states are unlikely to encounter additional challengers in the future.

Introduction

In recent years, despite China's repeated assurances that it would pursue peaceful development and resolution of any contested issues with its neighbours,¹ the

- 1 See Nie Hongyi, 'Explaining Chinese Solutions to Territorial Disputes with Neighbour States', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2009), pp. 487–523; Liu Feng, 'China's Security Strategy towards East Asia', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2016), pp. 151–79; Pang Xun, Lida Liu and Stephanie Ma, 'China's Network Strategy for

country has been increasingly challenged over territorial issues both on land and at sea.² For example, in 2013, the Philippines submitted an international arbitration claim to invalidate the ‘nine-dash line’ that China includes on its maps of the South China Sea. Tension over the territorial dispute between China and the Philippines reached a peak in July 2016, when the tribunal ruled in favour of the Philippines. A more recent example was India’s sending of guards to the border it shares with China in response to the latter’s construction of a road near the Donglang (Dolam) Plateau area.³ However, both the China–Philippines dispute and the China–India standoff incident were initiated by the ostensibly ‘weaker’ state, which presents the puzzle: Why do relatively weak states, such as India and the Philippines, initiate territorial disputes against relatively stronger opponents such as China?⁴

Much of the existing research has found that a territorial dispute is many times more likely to escalate to a militarised inter-state dispute (MID) and that a territorial MID heightens the risk of war.⁵ In an asymmetric war where the stronger state has greater capabilities with regard to natural resources and military

Seeking Great Power Status’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1–29; David Shambaugh, ‘China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order’, *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2005), pp. 64–99; Sun Xuefeng, ‘Why Does China Reassure South-East Asia?’, *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2009), pp. 298–316.

- 2 Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 3 ‘How India and China Have Come to the Brink Over a Remote Mountain Pass’, *New York Times*, 26 July, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/world/asia/dolam-plateau-china-india-bhutan.html? r=0>.
- 4 The above examples make clear that calling a challenger ‘weaker’ should only describe the challenger’s strength relative to the target country (i.e. China in these two cases). ‘Strong’ and ‘weak’ are, thus, only relevant in the dyadic context, see Ivan Arreguin-Toft, ‘How the Weak Win Wars’, *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2001), pp. 93–128. Following the established practice, I define a strong state as the ‘one whose material power exceeds that of its adversary or adversaries by at least ten to one’, see Arreguin-Toft, ‘How the Weak Win Wars’, p. 94. Material power is the combined values of a given state’s population and armed forces. In this sense, this distinction is dynamic and dyadic in nature as it only compares two states in a given year.
- 5 See, for example, Douglas M. Gibling, *The Territorial Peace: Borders, State Development, and International Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Paul Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Stephen A. Kocs, ‘Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945–1987’, *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (1995), pp. 159–75; Paul D. Senese and John A. Vasquez, ‘A Unified Explanation of Territorial Conflict: Testing the Impact of Sampling Bias, 1919–1992’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2003), pp. 275–98; Thorin M. Wright and Paul F. Diehl, ‘Unpacking Territorial Disputes Domestic Political Influences and War’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2016), pp. 645–69; Thorin M. Wright and Toby J. Rider, ‘Disputed Territory, Defensive Alliances and Conflict Initiation’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2014), pp. 119–44.

strength,⁶ the weaker state generally comes off the worst of the two. It is consequently widely assumed that a weaker state should avoid risky militarised confrontation with a relatively stronger state⁷. The existing research has shown that wars are inevitably costly⁸ and that territorial disputes pose high risk of escalation to war. It is, thus, assumed that the relatively weaker challenger should be incapable of making gains through war and, hence, be unlikely to initiate a territorial dispute against the stronger power, which could trigger an unwanted war that would incur exorbitant costs. Nevertheless, more than a half of territorial disputes in the 20th century were initiated by relatively weaker states rather than by their stronger counterparts, in spite of the high risk of escalation to war.⁹

For example, consider Figure 1 that depicts a challenger–target network for all territorial disputes in the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) territorial claims data from 1816 to 2001.¹⁰ Many of the major powers, such as China, in the international system have been challenged more than once by relatively weaker states.¹¹ How can this pattern of less powerful countries making territorial claims against stronger countries be explained?

While much of the existing research focuses on why and how power disparity leads to wars,¹² the literature offers little explanation as to why weaker states initiate territorial claims against relatively stronger states.¹³ In this article, I argue that although opportunity and material capability are relevant, the larger strategic environment in which the potential strong target and its additional challengers interact plays an important role in the decision to initiate a territorial dispute. Specifically, both the potential strong target and the weak challenger are strategic actors, and in a territorial dispute, the potential strong target's private

6 Daina Chiba, Carla Martinez Machain and William Reed, 'Major Powers and Militarized Conflict', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 58, No. 6 (2014), pp. 976–1002.

7 Thazha Varkey Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

8 James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (1995), pp. 379–414.

9 This information is from the Mapping Inter-state Territorial Conflict (MITC) data set where the relative power is simply defined by the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) score, the military size, and population from the Correlates of War (COW) project. For MITC, see Kenneth A. Schultz, 'Mapping Interstate Territorial Conflict: A New Data Set and Applications', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 61, No. 7 (2017), pp. 1565–90.

10 Bryan A. Frederick, Paul R. Hensel and Christopher Macaulay, 'The Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims Data, 1816–2011', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2017), pp. 99–108.

11 I excluded reciprocal disputes where both states in the dyad are coded as challengers. The challengers and targets are based on ICOW coding.

12 For example, see Arreguin-Toft, 'How the Weak Win Wars', pp. 93–128; Steve Chan, 'Major-Power Intervention and War Initiation by the Weak', *International Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2010), pp. 163–85; Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*.

13 In this study, I use initiation of territorial claim and initiation of territorial dispute interchangeably.

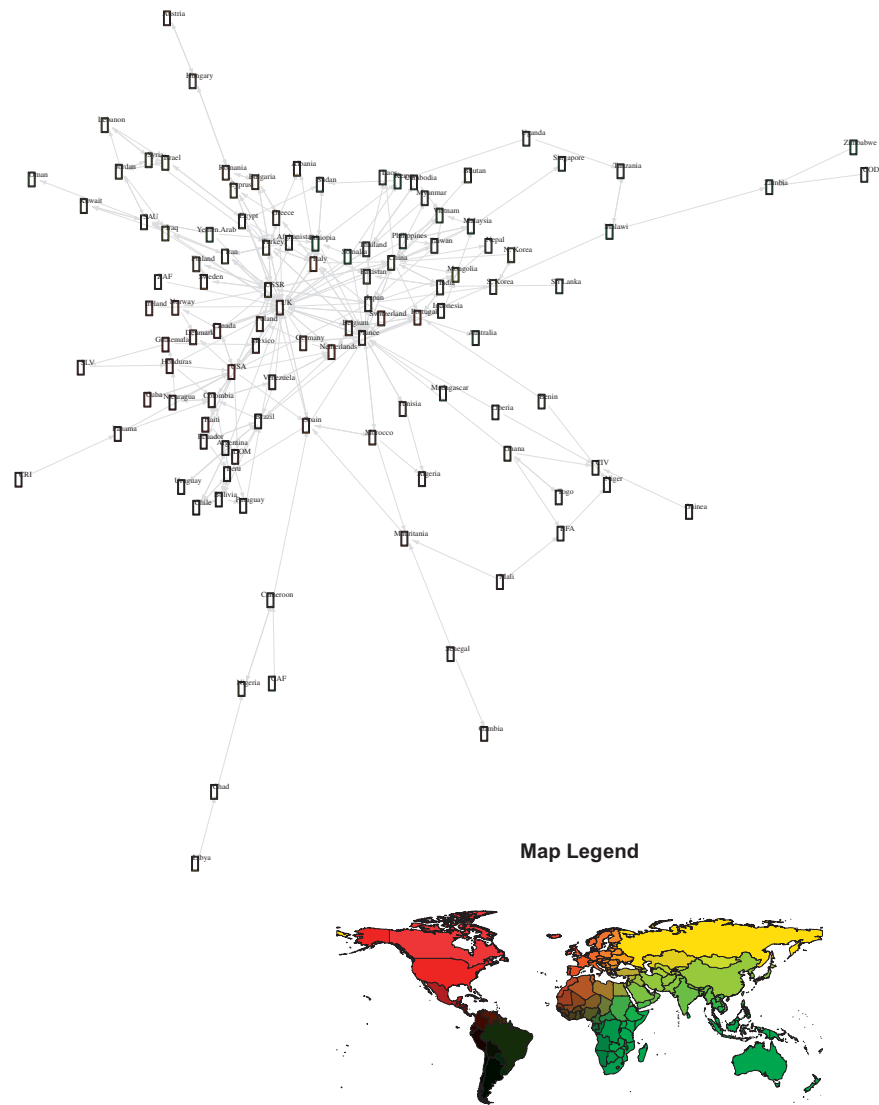


Fig. 1. The Challenger–Target Network in Territorial Disputes (1816–2001).
Note: The geographic coordinates of the nodes are represented in the map, while the arrow stands for action of initiating territorial disputes against the target by the challenger. Data are from Issue Correlated of War territorial claim data. ZAF = South Africa; ARE = United Arab Emirates; SAU = Saudi Arabia; BFA = Burkina Faso; SLV = El Salvador; CIV = Cote d’Ivoire; GNQ = Equatorial Guinea; COD = Congo (DRC); CAF = Central African Republic; CRI = Costa Rica.

information about its willingness to fight the challenger, as well as its incentive to misrepresent this information,¹⁴ are significant contributing factors to the weaker

14 Fearon, ‘Rationalist Explanations for War’, pp. 379–414.

challenger's decision whether or not to initiate what would be a risky and costly territorial dispute.¹⁵ If the potential challenger knew for sure that the strong target would respond to its dispute initiation with force, it would not initiate. However, if the potential challenger knew it was facing a target willing to make concessions, the challenger would be more likely to initiate the challenge over territory. The difficulty here for the potential challenger is that it does not know the type of the potential target with regard to its willingness to make concessions; thus, this becomes the potential strong target's private information.

Drawing insights from the work on reputation building in the recent inter- and intra-state war literature,¹⁶ I argue that, as a strategic actor, a potential weak challenger can infer the likelihood of a potential stronger target's making concessions by either examining the stronger target's past behaviour or by calculating the future additional challenges the strong target is likely to encounter and using that information to update its belief as to whether or not the stronger opponent is likely to concede. In this sense, the likelihood that a potential challenger will initiate a territorial dispute against its stronger target is higher if the potential stronger target has a reputation for accommodation derived from previous disputes and if it is unlikely to be similarly targeted in the future. Using Bayesian logistic regression, my analysis of the ICOW territorial claims data from 1816 to 2001 confirms that potential weaker challengers are more likely to initiate territorial disputes when potential stronger states have yielded in previous disputes and when potential stronger states are unlikely to encounter additional challengers in the future.

The Calculus of Territorial Dispute Initiation: Capability, Opportunity, Leaders, and External Support

While the role of territorial disputes and power (dis)parity in MIDs and inter-state wars has long been recognised, the existing literature has paid surprisingly little attention to the initiation of territorial disputes, let alone initiations by weaker states. Despite the similarity between the initiation of an MID (or war) and the initiation of a territorial dispute claim, the two differ in significant ways in that the latter does not necessarily lead to military confrontation and, thus, that war should not be treated as an inevitable outcome in the study of territorial disputes.¹⁷

15 Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, p. 32.

16 See, Todd S. Sechser, 'Reputations and Signaling in Coercive Bargaining', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (2018), pp. 318–45; Tang Shiping, 'Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict', *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2005), pp. 34–62; Barbara F. Walter, 'Information, Uncertainty, and The Decision To Scede', *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2006), pp. 105–35; Barbara F. Walter, *Reputation and Civil War: Why Separatist Conflicts Are so Violent* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (2015), pp. 473–95.

17 Branislav L. Slantchev, 'The Power to Hurt: Costly Conflict with Completely Informed States', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No.1 (2003), pp. 123–33.

There is rich literature on how power parity affects the decision to go to war, mainly deriving from the balance of power theory.¹⁸ It has been argued that power parity prevents war because no state can expect victory in such a situation. Although not directly touching on the initiation of territorial claims by weaker states, Bell examines how territorial claims between states condition the effect of power on interstate conflict.¹⁹ His analysis shows that, when the weaker state controls a piece of contested territory, an increase in the power of the state that does not hold the territory brings a greater probability of conflict initiation. However, as with most of the research, Bell treats the territorial claim as a given without further investigating why or whether or not the weaker side is likely to initiate the dispute in the first place. Although power parity is considered essential in a state-initiated dispute against a relatively stronger power, it is possible that a military victory might not be the initiator's main priority. In other words, weak states may have aims other than territory *per se*. In this sense, a weaker state may gain a political victory by virtue of a military stalemate, or even defeat, if that weak state can reduce the stronger state's political capability to wage a war over time. In other words, the possibility of political victory may increase the weaker state's incentive to strike and employ a limited-aims strategy.²⁰ These arguments, thus, tend to depart from the power parity explanation and focus instead on the leader's individual role and domestic politics. The existing research has examined the role of political leaders in territorial disputes in light of this logic.²¹

These studies indicate a logic of diversion that may play a role in a weaker state's decision to initiate a territorial dispute. Tir argues that, because people tend to react intensely to territorial issues, an embattled leader could attempt to manipulate and exploit this tendency specifically by launching a territorial conflict.²² Tir's territorial diversion argument receives strong empirical support. The initiation of ill-fated militarised disputes over territory is, in addition, linked to economic underperformance. When a state faces an internal threat, it may pursue cooperation to enhance its external security.²³ Meanwhile, a weak state's decision to initiate war has been shown to be related to the leader's risk-acceptant

18 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2010[1979]).

19 Sam R. Bell, 'Power, Territory, and Interstate Conflict', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2017), pp. 160–75.

20 Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, p. 27.

21 Giacomo Chiozza and Choi Ajin, 'Guess Who Did What: Political Leaders and The Management of Territorial Disputes, 1950–1990', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2003), pp. 251–78.

22 Jaroslav Tir, 'Territorial Diversion: Diversionary Theory of War And Territorial Conflict', *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (2010), pp. 413–25.

23 Giacomo Chiozza and Hein E. Goemans, 'Peace Through Insecurity: Tenure and International Conflict', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2003), pp. 443–67.

propensity.²⁴ The recent empirical work on leaders' roles in conflict initiation seems to support the idea that risk-acceptant leaders are more likely to initiate militarised conflict and war.²⁵ However, a leader's personality alone cannot explain the variation in weaker states' behaviour in this area, as not all leaders of weaker states have initiated territorial disputes against relatively stronger states. Moreover, changes in strategies and domestic politics may constrain such a risk-acceptant propensity.²⁶

More importantly, the existing literature has not fully explained why the weaker state initiates the dispute while the stronger state is sometimes willing to cooperate rather than escalate it through military confrontation. Fravel, a notable exception, provides a convincing explanation of the variation in China's strategies regarding territorial disputes, especially given that China is usually considered the relatively stronger side in such disputes with its neighbours.²⁷ Fravel finds that, when China faces internal threats to its regime security, particularly ethnic rebellions, China has been willing to make concessions in territorial disputes in exchange for assistance that strengthens the state's control over its territory and people but that China is, nevertheless, willing to use force to halt or reverse a decline in its bargaining power in disputes with its militarily powerful neighbours or in disputes in which it has no control of the land being contested. However, Fravel's explanation does not examine the initiation of these disputes. As Fravel notes, 'While the initiation of a territorial dispute in the first place is an important question, the theory is limited to explaining decisions to cooperate or escalate in existing disputes.'²⁸ Moreover, the explanatory power of his study is limited to Chinese cases. Therefore, we still lack systematic evidence regarding how and why weaker states make territorial claims.

In a recent work, Goemans and Schultz advance our understanding of why some states make claims over certain border areas, thereby highlighting the significance of considering the initiation of territorial claims in the first place.²⁹ In particular, Goemans and Schultz examine three theories of territorial dispute initiation that focus on whether or not an increase in a state's power increases the likelihood of its initiating a claim, whether the resources located along the border increase that likelihood, and whether or not a politically powerful ethnic group of a state that is located along the border increases the probability of its initiating a

24 Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, 'The War Trap Revisited: A Revised Expected Utility Model', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (1985), pp. 156–77.

25 Matthew Fuhrmann and Michael C. Horowitz, 'When Leaders Matter: Rebel Experience and Nuclear Proliferation', *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2014), pp. 72–87; Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, 'How Prior Military Experience Influences The Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders', *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2014), pp. 527–59.

26 Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, p. 10.

27 Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

29 Hein E. Goemans and Kenneth A. Schultz, 'The Politics of Territorial Claims: A Geospatial Approach Applied to Africa', *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (2017), pp. 31–64.

territorial claim. Goemans and Schultz find that ethnic political considerations are the most important drivers of territorial claims in Africa and that power considerations or resources play only a minor role in explaining the location of territorial claims. This study approaches the research question asked at the beginning of this article, but Goemans and Schultz also ignore the effect of the distribution of power within the challenger–target dyad based on the likelihood of the onset of a territorial claim. Moreover, their work fails to appreciate the conditions under which irredentism may make a territorial demand more likely.³⁰

Recent research has also discovered the strategic purpose of a territorial dispute. For example, Carter examines how weaker target states use disputed territory to consolidate states when facing stronger challengers, and asks why certain disputes are less likely to escalate to military disputes.³¹ Carter finds that the target countries of territorial claims can consolidate their control over disputed territory and so improve their ability to fight effectively for the disputed territory. Furthermore, his analysis shows that the strategic location of the territory can enhance the target state's consolidation which, in turn, may decrease the likelihood of escalation to a militarised dispute. However, Carter's work focuses on the stronger challenger's incentives to initiate a dispute against the weaker state that controls the disputed territory. Thus, we still know little about weaker challengers' incentives. The preventive war arguments, such as 'window of opportunity' and 'now-is-better-than-later',³² provide another possible explanation. The logic here is that fear that the status quo will deteriorate even more in the future and that waiting will not make any substantial difference to the state of the conflict may be an added incentive for a weaker state to engage in preventive war.³³ Therefore, the weaker challenger in an asymmetric conflict relationship may opt for offensive measures if it expects reluctance on the part of the stronger power to retaliate militarily.³⁴ This incentive may be reinforced by the perceived strength of the weaker state's claim.³⁵

30 Siroky and Hale recently examine the onset of irredentism using a global sample from 1947 to 2014 and find that economic parity conditions the effect of irredentism, see David S. Siroky and Christopher W. Hale, 'Inside Irredentism: A Global Empirical Analysis', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2017), pp. 117–28.

31 David B. Carter, 'The Strategy of Territorial Conflict', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2010), pp. 969–87.

32 Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 27.

33 Jack S. Levy, 'Declining Power and The Preventive Motivation for War', *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1987), pp. 82–107.

34 Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, p. 165.

35 Using a social network approach, Chen and Lee recently examine how competition among states can incentivize potential challengers to initiate territorial dispute claims, suggesting that the decision to initiate is dependent on the other's behaviour, see Chong Chen and So Jin Lee, 'Network Dependence and the Diffusion of Territorial Dispute Claims', Paper Presented at the 59th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, 4–7 April, 2018, San Francisco, CA.

More recent work has begun to explore the origin of territorial disputes. Carter and Abramson examine the origins of contemporary territorial disputes and find that the existence of competing historical precedents increases leaders' incentives to make territorial claims, owing to the ease of justification, the attached value, and the persistent coordination around old borders.³⁶ These authors argue that, in light of the persistent coordination effect of older boundaries, leaders are more inclined to prospectively integrate such old borders into their own states. Furthermore, Abramson and Carter find no direct evidence that perpetual territorial conflicts are driven by the disputed land's value in terms of its natural resources or strategic significance. Fang and Li use a survey experiment to examine the relationship between historical ownership and the perception of territorial indivisibility, which suggests that the escalation of territorial disputes to military confrontation is rooted in the historical origins of the borders.³⁷ While the existing research often relates the initiation of territorial disputes to the economic and strategic values of the contested areas, recent scholarship using highly disaggregated geospatial techniques has found little to support this argument.³⁸ Carter and Goemans examine the effect of how borders are drawn according to the likelihood of future territorial disputes, as well as of their escalation to militarised confrontation.³⁹ In particular, Carter and Goemans find that borders drawn along previously existing internal or external administrative frontiers carry a lower risk of future territorial disputes.

Other research has found that both democracies and alliance partners in territorial conflicts with each other are more likely to compromise and often settle their disputes.⁴⁰ For example, Gibler and Hutchison re-examine the relationship between regime type and territorial disputes through the linkage to audience cost

36 Scott Abramson and David B Carter, 'The Historical Origins of Territorial Disputes', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 110, No. 4 (2016), pp. 675–98; David B. Carter, 'History as a Double-Edged Sword: Historical Boundaries and Territorial Claims', *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2017), pp. 400–21.

37 Fang Songying and Li Xiaojun, 'Historical Ownership and Territorial Indivisibility', unpublished draft, Rice University, https://www.songyingfang.com/uploads/1/1/7/9/11792230/fang_and_li.pdf.

38 See Goemans and Schultz, 'The Politics of Territorial Claims', pp. 31–64; Schultz, 'Mapping Interstate Territorial Conflict', pp. 1565–90.

39 David B. Carter and Hein E. Goemans, 'The Making of The Territorial Order: New Borders and The Emergence of Interstate Conflict', *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2011), pp. 275–309.

40 See Douglas M. Gibler, 'Bordering on Peace: Democracy, Territorial Issues, and Conflict', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2007), pp. 509–32; Douglas M. Gibler and Jaroslav Tir, 'Settled Borders and Regime Type: Democratic Transitions as Consequences of Peaceful Territorial Transfers', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2010), pp. 951–68; Paul K. Huth and Todd L. Allee, *The Democratic Peace and Territorial Conflict in The Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

theory.⁴¹ They argue that territorial issues are salient and highly contentious and often incur high audience costs for democratic leaders. As a result, democracies are less likely to contest territorial issues. Wright and Diehl further focus on why territorial disputes are 'war-prone' and find that the different values that democratic and autocratic disputants place on territories shrink the bargaining space and are, hence, responsible for the higher risk of militarised territorial disputes between mixed regime dyads.⁴² While less attention has been paid to external support for the weaker state, the alliance literature provides another lens; with external support, the weaker state may no longer be the weaker side.⁴³

The existing research on alliances and MIDs has emphasised how a weaker challenger may be more likely to initiate MIDs if it has the support of an external ally. Under this 'emboldening' effect,⁴⁴ the weaker state may have a higher expected probability of victory. However, recent work has shown that alliances have both an 'emboldening' effect and a 'restraining' effect,⁴⁵ whereby a weaker challenger may be emboldened by its allies while the target is restrained by its ally. The probability of escalation is thus lower, or the weaker challenger may be constrained by its ally, which fears being dragged into an unnecessary war. In sum, these factors are constant over time for a given conflict and cannot provide a solid explanation for why states decide to initiate disputes at certain moments but not at others. Finally, other research has highlighted the impact of international norms.⁴⁶ The emergence of a norm against territorial conquest in the international system in the 1920s may explain the willingness to avoid the use

41 Douglas M. Gibler and Marc L. Hutchison, 'Territorial Issues, Audience Costs, and The Democratic Peace: The Importance of Issue Salience', *Journal of Politics*, Vol.75, No. 4 (2013), pp. 879–93.

42 Wright and Diehl, 'Unpacking Territorial Disputes Domestic Political Influences and War', pp. 645–69.

43 Brett Ashley Leeds, 'Do Alliances Deter Aggression? The Influence of Military Alliances on The Initiation of Militarized Interstate Disputes', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2003), pp. 427–39; Wright and Rider, 'Disputed Territory, Defensive Alliances and Conflict Initiation', pp. 119–44.

44 Daina Chiba, Jesse C. Johnson and Brett Ashley Leeds, 'Careful Commitments: Democratic States and Alliance Design', *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (2015), pp. 968–82; Fang Songying, Jesse C Johnson and Brett Ashley Leeds, 'To Concede or To Resist? The Restraining Effect of Military Alliances', *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (2014), pp. 775–809.

45 Brett V. Benson, 'Unpacking Alliances: Deterrent and Compellent Alliances and Their Relationship with Conflict, 1816–2000', *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (2011), pp. 1111–27; Fang, Johnson, and Leeds, 'To Concede or To Resist?', pp. 775–809.

46 Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Mark W. Zacher, 'The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and The Use of Force', *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No.2 (2001), pp. 215–50.

of force (in addition to its being increasingly illegitimate as well as costly), but its role in initiating disputes is not clear.

Past Behaviours and Future Stakes in Territorial Dispute Initiation

I now present my own explanation that focuses on how a potential challenger country can overcome the private information problem regarding the stronger target's willingness to fight and the incentive of the stronger country to misrepresent this information⁴⁷ for fear it may face additional future challengers for its territory. As previous findings suggest, power asymmetry is relevant to the outcome of war, and relatively weaker states are expected to avoid war, or at least to avoid instigating such wars, with stronger states.⁴⁸ Because of the attached values of a territory—whether symbolic or material—both weaker and stronger states would prefer not to give up territory in the face of an external challenge and would instead prefer to consolidate control over the territory in a way that consolidates and improves their capabilities relative to other powers.⁴⁹ Ideally, the potential weaker challenger would launch a territorial claim against the potential strong target only if that challenger was certain that the potential target was willing to give up the territory and unwilling to fight. However, the potential weaker challenger would not launch the territorial claim against the potential strong target if it knew that the potential target was not about to give up the territory and that it would respond with force. While we would not observe war in either case, we would see territorial claim initiation in the first scenario.

However, in practice, the potential challenger does not know whether it faces a strong target that is willing to fight or a strong target that is willing to give up the territory (or to make concessions). Thus, this knowledge is private information, and only the target itself knows what type of target it is. According to Fearon, under this situation, the presence of private information about the strong target's willingness increases the likelihood of territorial-related conflict and war.⁵⁰ Moreover, as strategic actors, the stronger state has the incentive to misrepresent this information, so making it even harder for the potential challenger to infer what type of stronger target it faces. This is especially true when the potential target is likely to encounter more challengers in future. Although the revelation of its true willingness to fight or not to fight may help potential challengers

47 Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', pp. 379–414.

48 See, Robert J. Carroll and Brenton Kenkel, 'Prediction, Proxies, and Power', *American Journal of Political Science*, forthcoming; Chan, 'Major-Power Intervention and War Initiation by The Weak', pp. 163–85; Daina Chiba, Carla Martinez Machain and William Reed, 'Major Powers and Militarized Conflict', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 58, No. 6 (2014), pp. 976–1002; David Singer, Stuart Bremer and John Stuckey, 'Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965', *Peace, War, and Numbers*, Vol. 19 (1972).

49 Carter, 'The Strategy of Territorial Conflict', pp. 969–87; Goemans and Schultz, 'The Politics of Territorial Claims', pp. 31–64.

50 Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', pp. 379–414.

avoid war in the present, it can make the target state more vulnerable and, so, create greater costs in the future, since other potential challengers may be more likely to raise challenges. In light of this, to deter future challengers, the potential target must choose to stand firm in the face of a territorial challenge and express its willingness to fight at a cost. However, doing this repeatedly would require credible and costly signalling that may incur even greater costs.⁵¹ This suggests that the potential strong target may behave more strategically.

The strong target country may be more willing to negotiate and offer concessions if the strategic environment in which it operates is more certain and that strong target is unlikely to be challenged by additional future challengers. In this sense, there is little value in developing a reputation for toughness and paying the costs of war.⁵² Of course, there is the possibility that the strong target would fight to resolve the dispute permanently, and so dispel worries about any future recurrence, since there is only one challenger. In other words, reputation building is unlikely to become a dominant strategy for the management of disputes.⁵³ I argue that three factors may lead the stronger target to prefer concessions to war.

First, the incentive to avoid the costs of fighting is strengthened by the logic of the 'power to hurt'.⁵⁴ If war is about the ability of a state to impose costs on their opponents and to bear costs in return, then even if the stronger state has a higher chance of winning the fight, once it realises it can still be hurt by the weaker state, or that it cannot punish the enemy beyond a certain point, the stronger target's incentive to pursue a peaceful negotiation will increase. In light of this logic, although the stronger target may not necessarily be concerned about the low probability of losing the fight, it does care about the potential cost the weaker state imposes on it through a militarised confrontation. Moreover, the stronger target may have other domestic agenda items that a military response might put at risk. For example, China has committed for the past three decades and the decades to come to domestic development and maintaining a stable and peaceful neighbouring security environment, in order to concentrate on state development. China does not want to be drawn into a border dispute and, therefore, always opts for peaceful dialogue. Negotiation can thus be initiated and may also be the weaker challenger's primary goal in initiating the claim. Once negotiations are underway, dyads begin discussing the terms of a resolution that often relate to concessions to the weaker states. Actors are expected to accept less-than-favourable settlement terms when they recognise that an opponent's asymmetric ability to inflict costs undermines their bargaining position.⁵⁵

51 James D. Fearon, 'Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1997), pp. 68–90.

52 Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*, p. 314.

53 Barbara F. Walter, 'Explaining The Intractability of Territorial Conflict', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2003), pp. 137–53.

54 Slantchev, 'The Power to Hurt: Costly Conflict with Completely Informed States', p. 123–33.

55 Jakana Thomas, 'Rewarding Bad Behavior: How Governments Respond to Terrorism in Civil War', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), pp. 804–18.

Secondly, when disputes are initiated by a weaker state, there is an increased probability that the stronger state will adopt a delaying strategy. This is because the stronger state knows that it has a better chance of winning the war if it should come to a fight and, consequently, that it has better bargaining power in negotiations with a militarily weaker power,⁵⁶ which can lessen the stronger state's incentive to use force. Therefore, a territorial dispute initiated by the weaker state is usually a limited one, because escalation may disrupt the weaker initiator's primary strategic aim and the stronger target's willingness to negotiate peacefully.

Thirdly, weaker states have historically won wars.⁵⁷ As Arreguin-Toft noted, weak actors have been victorious in nearly 30% of all asymmetric wars in the Correlates of War Project (COW), and this frequency has increased over time.⁵⁸ Consequently, when the strategic environment is more certain for the potential target, and there is only one, or relatively few possible future challengers, the strong target will be more likely to grant concessions than to fight. In light of this logic, the potential weak challenger will be more likely to initiate a territorial claim, since it knows that the stronger target has a waning incentive to fight.

However, if the strategic environment in which the potential strong target operates becomes less certain and the strong target believes it could face a series of potential challengers over time, investing in building a reputation for toughness may be a dominant strategy for addressing disputes. A forward-looking stronger state realises that such territorial challenges could recur in the future and, hence, that concessions in the current period may also be necessary in the future. In such a strategic environment of many potential challengers, the strong target knows that its behaviour in the current dispute will be observed by other potential challengers over time, which increases the risk of being targeted again in the future. Consequently, the potential strong target country is unwilling to make concessions and prefers to stand firm in the face of the challenger's territorial claim. As illustrated by the 1979 China–Vietnam border conflict, by militarily responding to the Vietnamese challenge, China successfully deterred subsequent territorial challenges that it would otherwise have had to face.⁵⁹ Again, in observing this logic, the potential challenger will be less likely to initiate a territorial claim, because it knows that the stronger target has a growing incentive to fight.

In addition to observing the strategic environment in which the potential strong target country operates, the potential challenger has another way of learning about the potential strong target's willingness to fight, specifically, through whether or not the potential strong target has made concessions in past disputes. As Weisiger and Yahi-Milo summarised, behaviours in past conflicts are the basis for inferring likely behaviour in response to future challenges.⁶⁰ Countries that have earned a reputation for toughness will be less likely to face challenges,

56 Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*.

57 Chan, 'Major-Power Intervention and War Initiation by The Weak', pp. 163–85.

58 Arreguin-Toft, 'How the Weak Win Wars', p. 96.

59 Carter, 'The Strategy of Territorial Conflict', pp. 969–87.

60 Weisiger and Yahi-Milo, 'Revisiting Reputation', pp. 473–95.

whereas those that have compromised in earlier conflicts will be more likely to be challenged, because past concessions, 'lead observers to believe that they can convince the country in question to make more significant concessions than they otherwise would have been willing to make'.⁶¹ Moreover, by making concessions to challengers in the past, as Walter argued, the potential strong target has revealed itself as a conciliatory state.⁶² This revelation can lead subsequent challengers to believe that the challenges they raise will be rewarded with concessions. This logic can explain why the Philippines and India have launched disputes against China; they probably knew China would not allow them to escalate to a fight and be willing to compromise, just as it had in the past.⁶³ Moreover, neither the 2013–2016 arbitration case nor the 2017 Donglang (Dolam) standoff incident constituted the first time that the Philippines and India had challenged China's territorial sovereignty and been offered concessions. Such past concessions also produce demonstration effects for other potential challengers:⁶⁴ China's being perceived as conciliatory makes an additional challenge seem less risky, and therefore more likely. This increases the likelihood that India, the Philippines, or even other neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, will raise subsequent challenges in the future.

Nevertheless, examining the past behaviours and future strategic environment of the potential strong target does not mean that the information will always enable the potential challenger to avoid war with an irresolute target. As Walter has noted,⁶⁵ the difficulty here is that the potential challenger does not know at what point the conciliatory target will compromise. Moreover, leaders and their administrations change over time, which may render the policies of a predecessor inapplicable to its successor. Despite those possible complex factors affecting the target's response, the two approaches are still valuable for helping the potential challenger operating in an otherwise uncertain environment to decide whether or not it wants to initiate a territorial dispute against the potential strong target. Considering these two considerations, I propose the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: A potential weaker challenger is more likely to initiate a territorial dispute against a potential relatively stronger target if the number of potential future challenges against the potential target country decreases.

Hypothesis 2: A potential weaker challenger is more likely to initiate a territorial dispute against a potential relatively stronger target if the potential target country has granted concessions in past disputes.

61 Weisiger and Yahi-Milo, 'Revisiting Reputation', p. 481.

62 Walter, 'Information, Uncertainty, and the Decision to Secede', p. 110.

63 Frel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*.

64 Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*.

65 Walter, 'Information, Uncertainty, and the Decision to Secede', pp. 105–35.

Of course, one alternative explanation to my argument is the commitment problem, whereby the weaker state thinks it must initiate the conflict now rather than wait till later. According to Powell and Fearon,⁶⁶ the weaker state initiates the territorial claim based on 'preventive initiation' and 'pre-emptive initiation' logic and because the disputed territory can add value in future bargaining. Admittedly, it is possible that initiating the claim can generate a first-move advantage for the weaker challenger, as illustrated by the case of the South China Sea arbitration brought by the Philippines. The Philippines gained international support for its stance, which to some extent can be construed as a political victory. However, the long period from the initiation to the resolution of the territorial dispute inhibits the weaker state's ability to bear the costs imposed by the stronger state over that period. Thus, it is not always incentive born of the first-move advantage that prompts a weaker state's initiation of a dispute. Meanwhile, as earlier argued, much disputed territory is often not necessarily indivisible and of low strategic importance, which may not help the challenger increase its future bargaining power. Finally, the preventive mechanism may be absent because the weaker state often lacks the ability to destroy the incentive of the stronger state to take over the territory. The commitment problem, therefore, cannot fully explain why weaker states initiate territorial disputes against stronger states.

Research Design

Data and the Dependent Variable

To test these hypotheses about the probability of territorial disputes initiated by weaker states, I employ a data set that includes all states in interactions with the states in their politically relevant international environments⁶⁷ for each year from 1816 to 2001.⁶⁸ The unit of analysis is the *directed-dyad-year*. The directed-dyad research design distinguishes cases where the weaker state initiated a dispute against a stronger opponent from cases where the stronger state initiated a dispute

66 Robert Powell, 'War as a Commitment Problem', *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2006), pp. 169–203; Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', pp. 379–414.

67 Douglas Lemke and William Reed, 'The Relevance of Politically Relevant Dyads', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2001), pp. 126–44.

68 Because including all country pairs will artificially inflate the same size (for example, for a world with $N = 100$ countries, we would obtain $N*(N - 1) = 9900$ directed dyads for just 1 year. This might be problematic because some countries cannot have realistic opportunities to dispute over territory. Thus, the politically relevant dyad includes all neighbouring country pairs or at least one major power in the dyad. I use COW's Direct Contiguity data with 400 miles to define neighbours and COW's Major Power list to construct the dyads. For the Direct Contiguity data, see Douglas M. Stinnett, Jaroslav Tir, Paul F. Diehl, Philip Schafer and Charles Gochman, 'The Correlates of War (COW) Project Direct Contiguity Data, version 3.0.', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2002), pp. 59–67.

against a weaker opponent.⁶⁹ Another advantage of using the directed-dyad design is that of the ability to include cases where territorial disputes are reciprocal.⁷⁰ As such, each dyad-year represents an opportunity for a potential challenger to initiate a territorial dispute. The data on territorial claims are from the ICOW territorial claims data.⁷¹

The dependent variable is the *initiation of a territorial claim*. In the ICOW data, a territorial claim is defined as an 'explicit contention between two or more nation-states claiming sovereignty over a specific piece of territory. Official government representatives (i.e. individuals who are authorised to make or state foreign policy positions for their governments) must make explicit statements claiming sovereignty over the same territory'.⁷² Note that a state can both verbally and militarily claim sovereignty. The time of initiation can be identified using the start date in the ICOW data. Thus, territorial claim initiation is coded as a dichotomous variable equal to 1 if a potential challenger makes an explicit statement claiming sovereignty over the territory against a potential target in a given year and 0 if otherwise.⁷³ While it is common for territorial claims to exist for years or decades once they are initiated, I only consider the *start year* when coding my dependent variable.⁷⁴

To identify weaker challengers, I follow Arreguin-Toft's practice and define a potential weaker challenger as, 'one whose material power is less than that of its adversary or adversaries by at least ten to one'.⁷⁵ Material power is the product of a given state's population and armed forces. I use the population and military personnel data in the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) score⁷⁶ from the COW project to construct a binary variable of whether or not the ratio

69 Leeds, 'Do Alliances Deter Aggression?', pp. 427–39.

70 Schultz, 'Mapping Interstate Territorial Conflict', p. 1570.

71 Frederick, Hensel and Macaulay, 'The Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims Data, 1816–2011', pp. 99–108. Note that when a state makes multiple territorial claims against another in a given year, I take the first claim to ensure a directed dyad appears only once in the sample in a given year.

72 For the details of coding, see <http://www.paulhensel.org/icowterr.html>.

73 This coding rule is consistent with Schultz where, 'a state is considered the challenger if it lays claim to territory that is not under its control, and a state is a target whenever there is a claim to territory not in its control', see Schultz, 'Mapping Interstate Territorial Conflict', p. 1570. Thus, the challenger is the state that sought to alter the status quo in its favor.

74 For example, if country *i* initiated a claim against country *j* at year *t* and the claim lasts for *n* years, I only code my dependent variable as true for year *t* and the remaining *t* + *n* years as false.

75 Arreguin-Toft, 'How the Weak Win Wars', p. 94.

76 Singer, Bremer and Stuckey, 'Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965'.

of the potential challenger's material power over the potential target's is less than 10 in a dyad-year. As noted earlier, this definition of a weaker challenger is dynamic and dyadic in nature, as it compares only two states in a given year.⁷⁷ I then use the variable weaker challenger dyad to exclude those dyads in the data that have a value of 0. This leaves a total number of 112158 *weak-strong-dyad* years for politically relevant dyads from 1816 to 2001.⁷⁸

Independent Variables

To test whether a potential strong target's past concessions affect the likelihood that a potential challenger will initiate a territorial claim, I use the outcomes of past MIDs in which potential strong targets were involved. In the MID dataset, the outcome contains a variety of forms such as stalemate, compromise, yielding by the challenger, yielding by the target, and victory by the target. Among these outcomes, *yielding* is coded as the outcome of a dispute when the dispute does not escalate to the use of force. Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo argue that the effect of past behaviour should decay over time,⁷⁹ indicating that more recent behaviour should have a larger effect than more remote past behaviour. I thus follow Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo and use a 10-year window as the decay function, whereby the variable of *past yielding* in territorial MIDs takes a value of 1 in the year immediately after the target country yielded, declining by 0.1 in every subsequent year until it returns to 0 after 10 years. In addition to past yielding in territorial MIDs, I include the variable of past yielding in non-territorial MIDs. I expect both variables to be positively associated with the likelihood of territorial dispute initiation by weaker challengers.⁸⁰

Measuring the strategic environment of the potential strong target is challenging, as we cannot exactly determine the risk of being challenged in the future. One proxy measure is the risk of territorial threats.⁸¹ Although the risk of territorial threats measures the latent probability that a country would experience a territorial conflict, it is generated *ex post* and might be endogenous to the

77 Formally, this variable at year t can be operationalized as

$$\text{weaker challenger dyad}_{\text{year } t} = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } \frac{\text{population}_{\text{challenger}} \times \text{military}_{\text{challenger}}}{\text{population}_{\text{target}} \times \text{military}_{\text{target}}} < 10 \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

As one of the reviewers points out, this operationalization is arbitrary and choosing different thresholds can affect the estimated effect in the empirical test.

78 The number of total politically relevant dyads is 1 92 362 from 1816 to 2001 in my data.

79 Weisiger and Yahri-Milo, 'Revisiting Reputation', p. 483.

80 I use the replication data from Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo for these two variables as I have the same data structure as theirs, see Weisiger and Yahri-Milo, 'Revisiting Reputation', pp. 473–95.

81 Tir, 'Territorial Diversion', pp. 413–25.

dependent variable. Another measure is to consider the potential strong target's number of land neighbours. As the existing research has suggested, bordering states are often likely to experience territorial disputes.⁸² Having borders with many neighbours can increase the exposure to the risk of a territorial dispute. In theory, all neighbouring states could be potential territorial claim initiators at some point in the future. Thus, the potential target state must assess its strategic environment to determine who the future challengers are likely to be. When a target state makes concessions to a challenger, it is more likely to be observed directly by its immediate neighbours, as bordering states usually have better knowledge of which segment of the border is subject to contestation.⁸³ This idea has been similarly used by Walter in assessing the future stakes of making concessions to separatists,⁸⁴ in which she examines how the number of ethnic groups within a country can affect the government's decision to fight certain separatists but not others.⁸⁵ I, thus, expect that the number of land neighbours will be negatively associated with the likelihood of territorial dispute initiation by potential weaker challengers, as more land neighbours means that the potential strong target is more likely to invest in reputation building, and thus unlikely to make concessions as it did in the past. The data on land neighbours are from the COW's Direct Contiguity data.⁸⁶ A land neighbour is coded only when a country and the potential target are separated by a land or river border.

Control Variables

To control for some of the possible explanations as discussed in the earlier sections, I also include a set of variables related to the first three hypotheses. First, Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll show that a change in the source of leadership support can lead to foreign policy change.⁸⁷ In a territorial dispute, leadership change has been a great source of strategy/stance change in territorial disputes. The recent dispute between China and the Philippines over the Spratly Islands demonstrated

82 See, Huth, *Standing Your Ground*; Andrew P. Owsiak, Paul F. Diehl and Gary Goertz, 'Border Settlement and the Movement Toward and From Negative Peace', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2017), pp. 176–93; Paul D. Senese, 'Territory, Contiguity, and International Conflict: Assessing A New Joint Explanation', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2005), pp. 769–79; Tir, 'Territorial Diversion', pp. 413–25.

83 Goemans and Schultz, 'The Politics of Territorial Claims', pp. 31–64.

84 See Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*; and Walter, 'Information, Uncertainty, and The Decision to Secede', pp. 105–35.

85 As Cunningham and Douglas found, although there may be observable differences between international conflict and civil war, the rationalist explanation framework can explain both types of conflict within and between states. This makes my analogy appropriate.

86 Stinnett, Tir, Diehl, Schafer and Gochman, 'The Correlates of War (COW) Project Direct Contiguity Data, Version 3.0.', pp. 59–67.

87 Michaela Mattes, Brett Ashley Leeds and Royce Carroll, 'Leadership Turnover and Foreign Policy Change: Societal Interests, Domestic Institutions, and Voting In The United Nations', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (2015), pp. 280–90.

how leadership can dramatically change the course of a dispute. I, thus, measure whether there was a change in the leadership source of support (SOLS change) using data from the Change in Source of Leader Support project.⁸⁸ Thus, the SOLS change in a potential challenger and the SOLS change in a potential target are two binary indicators of whether or not a new leader who relies for support on societal groups that are different from those of his predecessor comes to power in the potential challenger and potential target country, respectively.

Secondly, measuring the security environment of the potential target over such a long period is a challenge. In this study, I distinguish two types of security environment: an internal security environment and an external security environment. The former mainly focuses on the extent to which the state is internally stable and peaceful. I use the COW's intra-state war data to create an indicator of whether or not the state was engaged in a civil war in a given year. For the external security environment, I use the number of inter-state wars the potential target state fought in a given year as my third measure of external threats. The data on inter-state war are from COW's inter-state wars list.⁸⁹

Thirdly, to control for the effects of alliance support on the likelihood of territorial dispute initiation, I follow Leeds to create two variables: the potential target has a defensive ally and the potential challenger has an offensive ally.⁹⁰ Leeds finds that different types of alliances have distinctive effects on the probability of MIDs where a potential target with defensive allies can decrease the likelihood of MIDs, while a potential challenger with offensive allies can increase the probability of MIDs. These two binary variables can represent whether or not, 'the potential target had any allies who were committed to defending the target in the event that the target was attacked by this potential challenger, and whether the potential challenger had any allies who were committed to joining in an offensive attack against this target'.⁹¹

In addition to these measures, I control for the effect of regime type. Using Polity IV data,⁹² I created a binary variable, *joint democracy*, for when both states score six or higher on the Polity2 score. To control for the effect of geographic proximity, I created a dummy variable, *land neighbour*, to measure whether the potential challenger and the potential target are separated by a land or river border using the COW's Direct Contiguity data.⁹³ The existing research

88 Michaela Mattes, Brett Ashley Leeds and Naoko Matsumura, 'Measuring Change in Source of Leader Support: The CHISOLS Dataset', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2016), pp. 259–67.

89 Meredith Reid Sarkees and Frank Wayman, *Resort to War: 1816–2007* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010).

90 Leeds, 'Do Alliances Deter Aggression?', pp. 427–39.

91 *Ibid.*, pp. 431–32.

92 Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jaggers, 'Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2002', <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>.

93 Stinnett, Tir, Diehl, Schafer and Gochman, 'The Correlates of War (COW) Project Direct Contiguity Data, Version 3.0.', pp. 59–67.

has often used capacity ratio as a measure of power, usually taking the CINC score. However, this is, ‘barely better than random guessing at predicting military dispute outcomes’.⁹⁴ Using supervised learning techniques, Carroll and Kenkel estimate the probability that each state will win a hypothetical dispute. The resulting *dispute outcome expectations* (DOE) score is, thus, superior to the capability ratio in the sense that it is directly interpretable as the probability of victory in the bargaining, which is consistent with the logic in this article, as raw capability affects only the outcome of a territorial dispute by shaping expectations about how a dispute will end. In this sense, following the recommendation of Carroll and Kenkel, I control only for the DOE score.⁹⁵ I create a ratio variable to measure the potential challenger’s share of expected probability of victory over the sum of the potential challenger and potential target’s expected probability of victory.

Finally, to address the potential temporal dependence in the time-series cross-section data (TSCS), I follow Carter and Signorino⁹⁶ to create a count of *the number of years* that have elapsed since the last initiation for each directed dyad and the square and cubic of this count. I expect the underlying risks of territorial dispute initiation relapse to fluctuate along with the time since previous territorial disputes have ended.⁹⁷ Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for these variables.

Modeling Strategy

Given the binary nature of my dependent variable, I use a logistic regression model to estimate the likelihood of a territorial claim initiated by weaker states. However, the classical logistic regression models often suffer from a separation problem in situations where a linear combination of the predictor is perfectly predictive on the dependent variable.⁹⁸ This is a potential issue in this project, given

94 Carroll and Kenkel, ‘Prediction, Proxies, and Power’, p. 1.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

96 David B. Carter and Curtis S. Signorino, ‘Back to the Future: Modeling Time Dependence in Binary Data’, *Political Analysis*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2010), pp. 271–92.

97 One anonymous reviewer notes that the history and characteristics of the dyads may affect the incentive to initiate. It may be the case, and, more importantly, other extra-dyads’ history can also affect the incentive, as argued in Chen and Lee’s article. However, they found that dyadic MID experience does not have a significant impact, see Chen and Lee, ‘Network Dependence and the Diffusion of Territorial Dispute Claims’. Meanwhile, it may be statistically problematic if I included the characteristics of the contested territory in the model, because it will perfectly predict the onset of initiation. This is because we can only include these variables when we know which piece of territory is contested.

98 Christopher Zorn, ‘A Solution to Separation in Binary Response Models’, *Political Analysis*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2005), pp. 157–70.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St.Dev.	Min	Max	The Correlation Matrix among Variables
Territorial MID initiation	109,83	0.0	0.1	0	1	
No. of land neighbours	112,15	4.	3.9	0	2	
Past yielding	112,15	0.0	0.1	0.0	1.	
Past yielding (non-territory)	112,15	0.	0.2	0.0	1.	
Joint democracy	103,16	0.	0.4	0	1	
Defensive alliance (target)	112,15	0.	0.4	0	1	
Offensive alliance	112,15	0.	0.2	0	1	
Land neighbour	112,15	0.	0.4	0	1	
Alliance strength	112,15	0.	0.7	-1.5	1.	
Alliance strength (target)	112,15	0.	0.6	-1.5	1.	
Civil war (target)	112,15	0.	0.3	0	1	
Interstate war (target)	112,15	0.	0.4	0	3	
SOLS change (target)	112,15	0.	0.3	0	1	
SOLS change (challenger)	112,15	0.	0.3	0	1	
Exp. victory prob. Ratio	112,15	0.	0.1	0.1	0.	
Capability ratio	112,15	0.	0.3	0.000	1.	
No. of states in negative	112,14	30.	38.3	0	17	
Past yielding (general)	112,15	0.	0.3	0.0	1.	
Year since last initiation	112,15	40.	39.3	0	18	
Year since last initiation	112,15	3,21	5,717.	0	34,2	
Year since last initiation	112,15	343,12	866,05	0	6,331.	

Note: On the right panel, ‘Y’ = initiation; ‘X1’ = no. of land neighbours (target); ‘X2’ = past yielding; ‘X3’ = past yielding (non-territory); ‘X4’ = joint democracy; ‘X5’ = defensive alliance (target); ‘X6’ = offensive alliance (challenger); ‘X7’ = land neighbour; ‘X8’ = potential military capability of alliance (challenger); ‘X9’ = potential military capability of alliance (target); ‘X10’ = number of civil wars (target); ‘X11’ = number of interstate wars (target); ‘X12’ = change in source of leader support (target); ‘X13’ = change in source of leader support (challenger); ‘X14’ = expected probability of victory ratio; ‘X15’ = capability ratio

that the initiation of a territorial claim is relatively rare, and the large size of directed-dyadic observations. I, thus, follow the recommendation of Gelman et al⁹⁹ and use a Bayesian logistic regression approach.¹⁰⁰ Essentially, the Bayesian logistic regression model first scales all non-binary variables to obtain a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 0.5, while binary input variables are re-scaled to a mean of 0 and to differ by 1 in their lower and upper conditions. The model then places independent Student’s *t*-test prior distributions on the coefficients. Following Gelman et al., I use the default Cauchy distribution with center 0 and scale 2.5 for all my model coefficients other than the constant. The resulting posterior mode can be used as a point estimate, and the standard errors can be obtained from the curvature of the log-posterior density. As such, we can interpret the outputs in the same way as we usually do for classical logistic regression.¹⁰¹

99 Andrew Gelman, Aleks Jakulin, Maria Grazia Pittau and Yu-Sung Su, ‘A Weakly Informative Default Prior Distribution for Logistic and Other Regression Models’, *The Annals of Applied Statistics*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2008), pp. 1360–83.

100 The inclusion of the combination of three polynomial terms on *peace year* may potentially be perfectly predictive given the large size of the sample and the rare occurrence of claim initiation. In my analyses, separation is not a problem. However, I use it anyway because if separation is not presented, it is will give similar results as a classic logit model.

101 Gelman, Jakulin, Pittau and Su, ‘A Weakly Informative Default Prior Distribution for Logistic and Other Regression Models’, p. 1380.

However, there might be some concerns about a potential selection bias problem, because many of the same factors that may be responsible for leading states' initiation of territorial disputes against relatively stronger ones may also be positively associated with the territorial claims. That is, the selection of a territorial dispute may not be random. While matching analysis does not adjust for unobserved factors that may be associated with the selection into the treatment, it can ensure balance among observed features of the treatment and control observations to adjust for non-random treatment.¹⁰² Thus, I use matching methods as robustness checks.

Results and Discussions

Core Models

Figure 2 summarises the results of the Bayesian logistic regressions. In Models 1–4, the dependent variable is *territorial claim initiation* from the ICOW data, while in Model 5, I use *militarised territorial dispute initiation* as the dependent variable. Models 1–5 focus on the directed dyads that involve only potential weaker challengers and potential stronger targets, while Model 6 uses the full sample. The results in Figure 2 lend a strong support to my hypotheses that a weaker state's decision to initiate a territorial dispute against a relatively stronger opponent is strongly influenced by whether or not the relatively stronger state has made concessions in past militarised territorial disputes and by whether or not the stronger state can be expected to do so again in a future militarised territorial dispute. Even after controlling for a set of previous explanations, these findings still hold. Rather than paying attention to the coefficient estimates in the regression tables, I primarily focus on the predicted probabilities of my covariates, which is an increasingly popular approach in political science. Given the obvious limitations of calculating marginal effects in models with limited dependent variables, I rely on a simulation approach. In other words, instead of presenting the estimated effect for the 'average case', I am interested in the estimate of the 'average effect' in the population.¹⁰³ For each of the k simulations, I hold each of the 'other independent variables at the observed values for each case in the sample, calculating the relevant predicted probabilities or marginal effects for each case

102 See, Daniel E. Ho, Kosuke Imai, Gary King and Elizabeth A. Stuart, 'Matching As Nonparametric Preprocessing for Reducing Model Dependence in Parametric Causal Inference', *Political Analysis*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2007), pp. 199–236; Stefano M. Iacus, Gary King, Giuseppe Porro and Jonathan N. Katz, 'Causal Inference without Balance Checking: Coarsened Exact Matching', *Political Analysis*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2012), pp. 1–24; Michael R. Kenwick, John A. Vasquez, and Matthew A. Powers, 'Do Alliances Really Deter?', *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (2015), pp. 943–54.

103 Michael J. Hammer and Kerem Ozan Kalkan, 'Behind The Curve: Clarifying the Best Approach to Calculating Predicted Probabilities and Marginal Effects from Limited Dependent Variable Models', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2013), pp. 263–77.

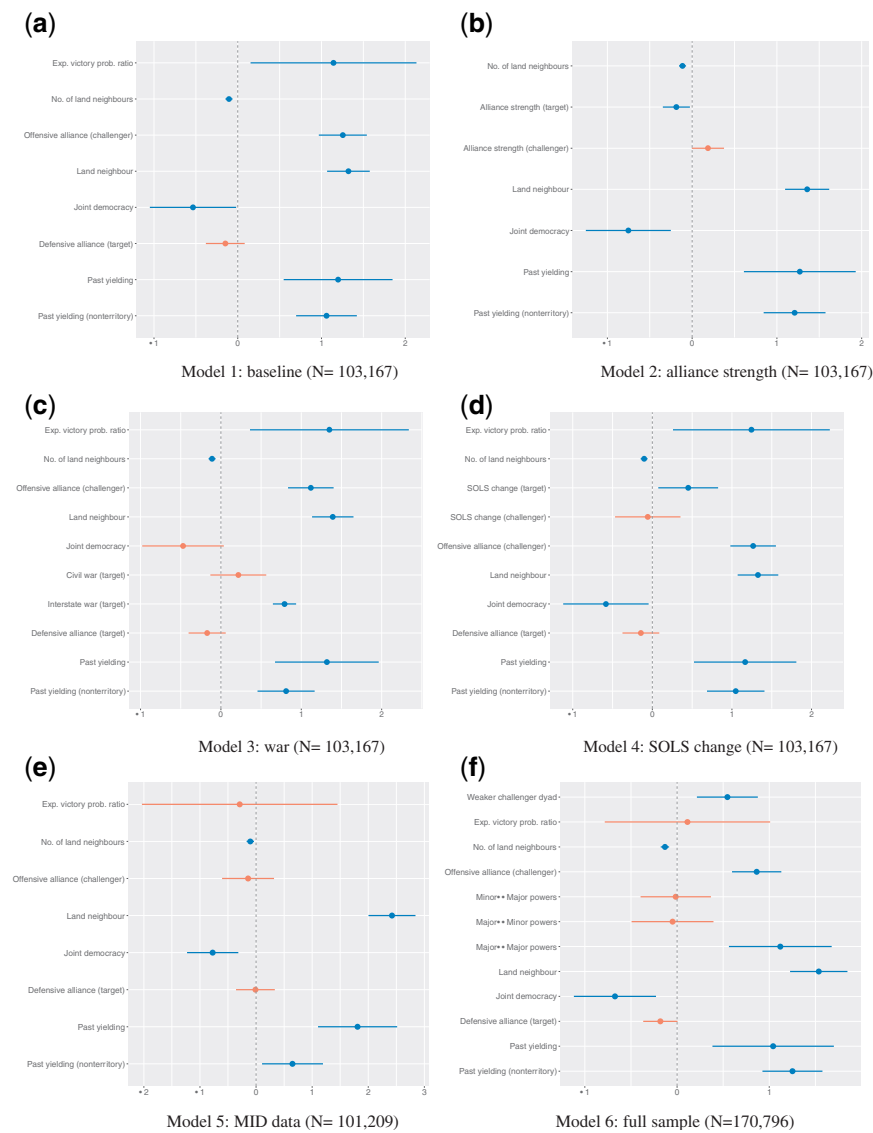


Fig. 2. Coefficient Plots for Bayesian Logistic Regression Analysis of Factors Affecting the Likelihood of Territorial Dispute Initiation by Weaker States.

- (a) Model 1: baseline (N = 103,167)
(b) Model 2: alliance strength (N = 103,167)
(c) Model 3: war (N = 103,167)
(d) Model 4: SOLS change (N = 103,167)
(e) Model 5: MID data (N = 101,209)
(f) Model 6: full sample (N = 170,796)

Note: Figure 2 plots the coefficients with 95% confidence intervals across Models 1–6. The polynomial terms on *peace years* are excluded owing to space limitations. Standard errors are clustered by directed dyad. SOLS = source of leader support.

and then averaging over all of the cases'.¹⁰⁴ The goal of the 'observed value' approach is, thus, to obtain an estimate of the average effect in the population. In addition, this approach is more robust to model misspecification.¹⁰⁵

Model 1 presents the main results. First, the coefficient of the number of land neighbours is statistically significant but negative, suggesting that potential weaker challengers are increasingly less likely to initiate territorial disputes as the number of the potential target's land neighbours increases. Recall that the variable, *number of land neighbours*, excludes cases where the potential challenger in question is a land neighbour of the potential target in question. In this sense, this finding is quite interesting because it reveals the strategic information about how geographic proximity can affect state interaction in two ways. On the one hand, the existing research would predict that geographically proximate states are more likely to experience conflict. My variable *land neighbour* between the potential challenger and potential target is positively associated with an increase in the risk of territorial claim initiation, which is consistent with the previous findings. On the other hand, once we control for this geographic proximity between the dyad in question, we find that the risk of territorial dispute onset decreases, which runs counter to what the existing research might predict. When the potential stronger target is likely to encounter many potential relatively weaker challengers in the future, the stronger target should have strong incentive to fight the current challenger and build its reputation for resolve and so deter future challengers. By contrast, when the potential stronger target is likely to face only one challenger, it will have little incentive to invest in such reputation building and, consequently, be more likely to accommodate the current challenger's demand. According to this logic, the potential weaker challenger should be aware of the strategic incentives of the stronger states and be less inclined to initiate a challenge when the target has additional land neighbours. This provides strong support for my main Hypothesis 1.

Secondly, in Model 1, the coefficient of the *past yielding* of a potential target is statistically significant and positive. This suggests that potential weaker challengers that face relatively stronger opponents that have backed down in past territorial disputes are, as a result, more likely to challenge the relatively stronger opponents. As Fravel observed,¹⁰⁶ since its establishment in 1949, China has made compromises and offered concessions in 17 of 23 territorial conflicts, so establishing a reputation as a country that lacks resolve. In light of these findings, relatively weaker states along China's borders, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, would be increasingly likely to challenge China over the contested

104 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

105 For more details, see Andrew Gelman and Jennifer Hill, *Data Analysis Using Regression and Multilevel Hierarchical Models* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 142–3; Hanmer and Kalkan, 'Behind The Curve', p. 265.

106 Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 1–2.

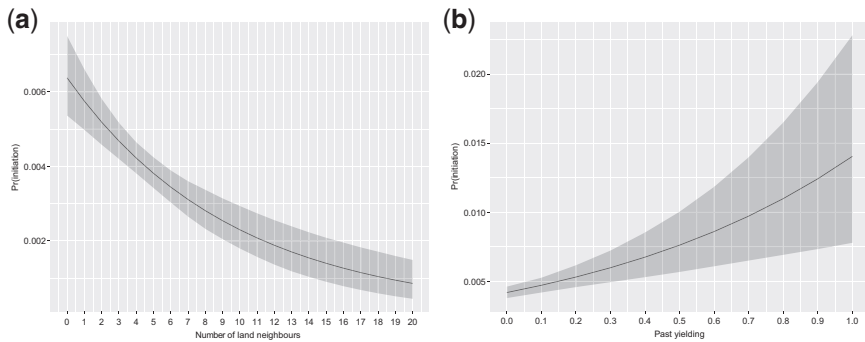


Fig. 3. Predicted Effects of Past Concession and Future Stake on Territorial Dispute Initiation by Weaker States.

(a) Number of land neighbours

(b) Past yielding

Note: Panel a of Figure 3 plots the predicted probabilities of territorial dispute initiation by weaker states as a function of the number of land neighbours that a potential target has. Panel b of Figure 3 plots the predicted probabilities of territorial dispute initiation by weaker states as a function of the number of a potential target's past yielding in militarised territorial disputes. The grey areas denote the 95% confidence intervals computing from 1000 draws from the posterior distribution of the parameters in Model 1 of Figure 2.

islands in the South China Sea, in the knowledge that China has often backed down in the past and lacks a reputation for toughness. In addition to the measure on past yielding in a territorial dispute, I further find that backing down in non-territorial disputes in the past¹⁰⁷ may also increase the potential target's likelihood of being challenged by a potential weaker opponent, which is indicated by the coefficient of past yielding (non-territory).

Figure 3 graphs the simulated predicted effects of a potential target's number of land neighbours and past yielding in a territorial dispute based on Model 1 of Figure 2. Panel a of Figure 3 clearly reveals that the likelihood of territorial dispute initiation by weaker states decreases as the number of a potential target country's additional land neighbours increases. By contrast, Panel b of Figure 3 displays the dispute-inducing effects of past yielding by the potential target state on the likelihood of territorial dispute initiation by weaker states. A target state that has compromised the previous year is more than three times as likely to be challenged than is a country that has not made compromises in the previous 10 years. In Figure 4, I plot the first-difference in the predicted probability of territorial dispute initiation for all the explanatory variables, changing from its minimum value to its maximum value in the data based on Model 1 of Figure 2. Through this novel simulation-based 'observed value' approach, we can also interpret the 'marginal effect' (the first-difference) as the 'average effect' in the population.

107 In this sense, the reputation can be built on multiple interactions in the past, see Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

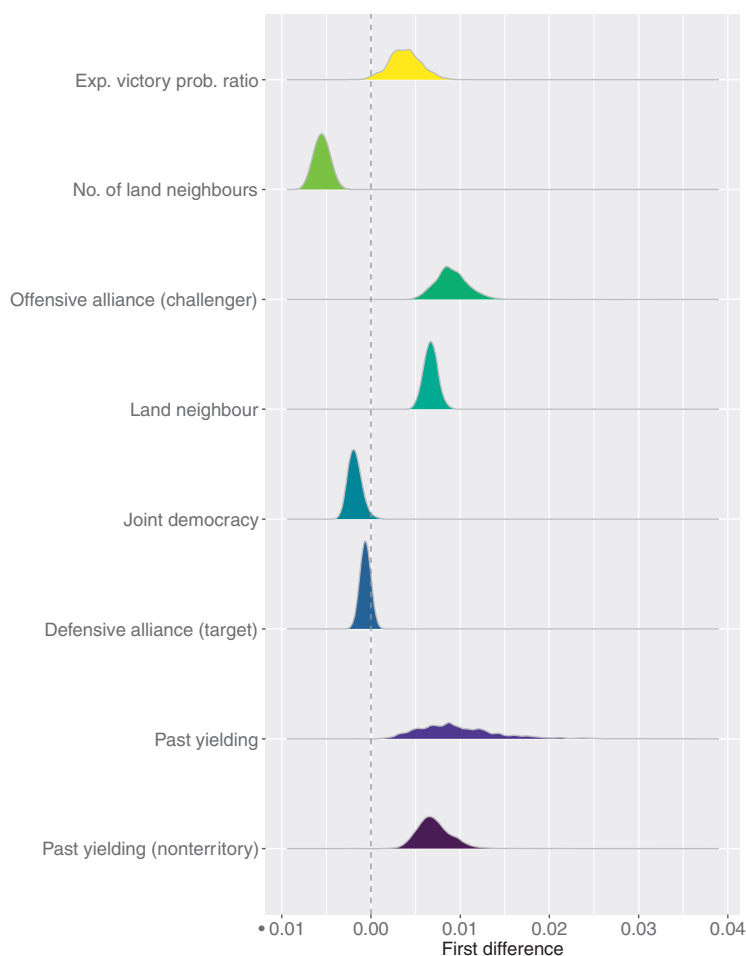


Fig. 4. Marginal Effects of Explanatory Variables on Territorial Dispute Initiation by Weaker States.

Note: Figure 4 plots distributions of change in predicted probability of territorial dispute initiation by weaker states for explanatory variables in Model 1 of Figure 2. The polynomial terms on peace years are excluded owing to space limitations. The density plots display the average effects of explanatory variables in the population over 1000 draws from the posterior distribution of the parameters. The variables of interest are changing their values from its minimum to its maximum values, while all other variables are taking their observed values in each draw.

Since the 95% confidence intervals in the two densities do not include the vertical line (i.e. $x = 0$), there is a strong evidence to support my explanation as to why weaker states initiated territorial disputes against relatively stronger opponents. The findings suggest that relatively weak states decide whether or not to challenge stronger states based on whether or not the relatively strong opponents have made concessions in the past and whether or not the stronger state may be

expected to do so again in the future, which is also consistent with the general findings in the reputation literature.¹⁰⁸

Turning to the control variables in Model 1 of Figure 2, most of them perform as expected based on the findings in previous research. Specifically, the coefficient of a potential challenger having an offensive ally is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that having an offensive ally does increase the likelihood that a potential challenger will initiate a territorial dispute against a relatively stronger target. In contrast, the coefficient of a potential target that has a defensive ally is not statistically significant. In addition to the binary measure of whether a state has an offensive or defensive alliance, I use a new measure to capture the mean potential military capacity of an alliance found in Benson and Clinton¹⁰⁹ and replace the binary alliance variables in Model 2 of Figure 2. Although the statistical significance of the two variables switches in Model 2, the coefficient signs are highly consistent with the binary measures of the two variables in Model 1. Together they show that an offensive alliance has an ‘emboldening’ effect,¹¹⁰ while a defensive alliance has a ‘deterrent effect’.¹¹¹ It is possible that the weaker challenger was emboldened by its allies, while the potential military capacity of the target’s alliance can deter potential challenge, as the existing theories have suggested. Moreover, even given these differing measures of alliance, my two main explanatory variables show consistent and robust effects from Model 1 to Model 2.

Meanwhile, the effect of *joint democracy* is consistent with the expectation across models, which suggests that potential democratic challengers are less likely to initiate territorial disputes against relatively stronger potential democratic targets. This is consistent with the ‘territorial peace’ thesis, which often identifies a strong pacifying effect of joint democracy on territorial conflict.¹¹² Moreover, the coefficient of the expected probability of victory ratio is positively associated with the increase in the likelihood of territorial dispute initiation. This means that when a potential challenger expects to have a higher chance of winning the fight, it is more likely to initiate the dispute. Notice that my explanation does not discard this finding, and we should not interpret this as a counter-argument to my theory. Instead, this means that, even when we control for the expected outcome, the potential challenger will still gauge its decision based on the potential

108 See Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*, pp. 105–35; Weisiger and Yahi-Milo, ‘Revisiting Reputation’, pp. 473–95.

109 Brett V. Benson and Joshua D. Clinton, ‘Assessing the Variation of Formal Military Alliances’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 5 (2016), pp. 866–98.

110 See Chiba, Johnson and Leeds. ‘Careful Commitments’, pp. 968–82; Fang, Johnson and Leeds, ‘To Concede or to Resist?’, pp. 775–809.

111 Benson, ‘Unpacking Alliances’, pp. 1111–27; Fang, Johnson and Leeds, ‘To Concede or to Resist?’, pp. 775–809.

112 See Gibler, ‘Bordering on Peace’, pp. 509–532; Gibler, *The Territorial Peace*; Gibler and Tir, ‘Settled Borders and Regime Type’, pp. 951–68; Gibler and Hutchison, ‘Territorial Issues, Audience Costs, and The Democratic Peace’, pp. 879–93.

challenger's past behaviour and future stakes. In addition, this should be the main conclusion. Figure 4 displays the distributions of change in the predicted probability of territorial dispute initiation by weaker states for all the explanatory variables in Model 1.

In addition to Model 2, which switches the binary alliance variables, I further examine whether or not the main effects are subject to change when including other different specifications from the existing research. Model 3 of Figure 2 tests whether or not the potential challenger is opportunistic, in the sense of whether or not the likelihood of territorial dispute initiation emanates from its opportunity to take advantage of the potential target's internal and/or inter-state war. The potential weaker challenger is more likely to initiate a territorial dispute when a potential target's security environment is deteriorating, in part because the potential target is bogged down with other challenges and in part because the likelihood of escalation to war is much lower, which can, in turn, embolden the potential challenger to make a territorial claim. The civil war variable measures whether or not there was an ongoing intra-state war in the potential target state, while that of inter-state war counts the number of inter-state wars the potential target was fighting with other states, excluding the potential challenger in question. The coefficients for both variables in Model 3 are positive, suggesting an increase in the likelihood of territorial initiation by a potential challenger if it observes an opportunity.

Model 4 controls for the change in the source of leader support. As Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll suggest,¹¹³ the potential challenger is more likely to initiate a territorial dispute when a new leader, who relies on support from societal groups different from those of his predecessor, comes to power in the potential target country. The coefficient of SOLS change in the potential target is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the potential challenger is likely to take advantage of the SOLS change in the potential target by making a territorial claim against the new leader. In contrast, it is less likely to initiate a territorial dispute when the potential challenger country experiences an SOLS change, even though the coefficient of the variable SOLS change in the potential challenger is not significant. On one hand, the result in Model 4, thus, confirms that potential challengers are more likely to initiate territorial disputes against stronger states when the potential target country has a new leader whose societal support groups are different from his predecessor's. On the other hand, even after controlling for this leadership change explanation, past yielding and the number of land neighbours still have explanatory power.

In Model 5, I replicate the specification of Model 1 but use the initiation of a militarised territorial dispute from the MID data as my dependent variable. Although past yielding and the number of land neighbours are still consistent with their effects in Model 1, the coefficients of the expected probability of

113 Mattes, Leeds and Carroll, 'Leadership Turnover and Foreign Policy Change', pp. 280–90; Mattes, Leeds and Matsumura, 'Measuring Change in Source of Leader Support', pp. 259–67.

victory ratio and the alliance-related measures are no longer statistically significant. Given that initiating a territorial claim is, on average, less salient than initiating a militarised territorial dispute in the sense that the latter carries a higher risk of escalation to war, the changing sign of the expected probability of victory ratio and the alliance-related measures is not surprising. This may suggest that a potential weaker challenger is more likely to initiate a militarised territorial dispute when it believes it has a lesser chance of winning should the initiation of a territorial claim escalate to war. This empirical finding seems counterintuitive but, in fact, conforms to the explanation in this article. As I discuss earlier, the perception of the power balance mechanism may not be at work at the initiation of a territorial dispute, given that war is not an outcome of the initiating action, and weaker challengers have strategic goals other than taking territory. These findings are also found in Model 6, where I use a full sample that includes all the politically relevant dyads from 1816 to 2001.

The dependent variable in Model 6 is the initiation of a territorial claim identified in the ICOW dataset. As shown in Panel f of Figure 2, the potential challenger is more likely to initiate a territorial claim when both the potential challenger and potential target are major powers. Similarly, the potential challenger is more likely to initiate a territorial claim when the potential challenger is the weaker and the potential target the stronger of the two, as suggested by the variable weaker challenger dyad. The results in Model 6 also provide evidence to generalise my two arguments as to why weaker states initiate territorial disputes with all types of challengers, because Model 6 does not focus on the weaker challenger–stronger target dyad. However, I leave this generalisation for future exploration. In Figure 5, I compare the substantive effects of past yielding and the number of land neighbours across the five models using the simulation-based approach. Figure 5 clearly reveals that, even after controlling for factors in existing work, my explanation is still robust.

Finally, I present evidence that my main explanatory variables help predict territorial dispute initiation by weaker states. Figure 6 displays two receiver operating curves (ROC),¹¹⁴ which are used to non-parametrically assess the performance of competing methods for classifying binary outcomes. ROC curves demonstrate the in-sample predictive performance of the models. The greater the area under the curve (AUC), the better the predictive value of a model. The dotted line denotes Model 1 in Figure 2, while the solid line denotes a controls-only model that excludes information on targets' past concessions and strategic environments. The graph clearly reveals that, as the AUC increases from 0.76 to 0.81, including my main explanatory variables improves the in-sample predictive

114 Brian Greenhill, Michael D. Ward, and Audrey Sacks, 'The Separation Plot: A New Visual Method for Evaluating the Fit of Binary Models', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (2011), pp. 991–1002; James A. Hanley and Barbara J. McNeil, 'The Meaning and Use of the Area Under a Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) Curve', *Radiology*, Vol. 143, No. 1 (1982), pp. 29–36.

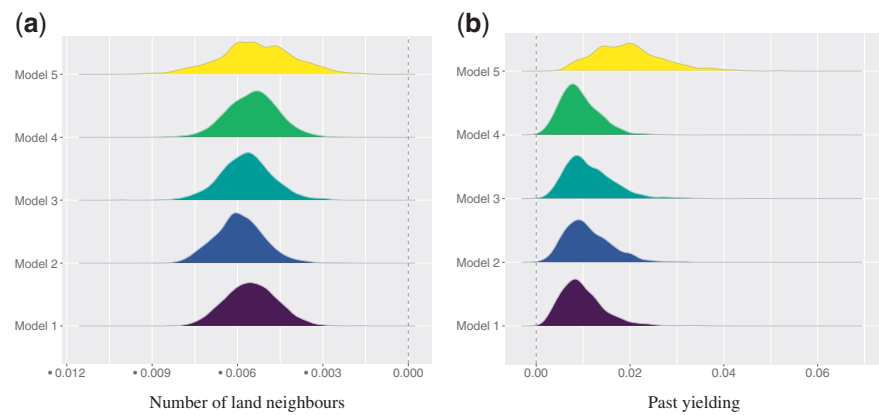


Fig. 5. Comparing the Effects of Past Concession and Future Stake across Models.

(a) Number of land neighbours

(b) Past yielding

Note: Panel a of Figure 5 displays distributions of change in the predicted probability of territorial dispute initiation by weaker states for the number of land neighbors across the five models in Figure 2. Panel b of Figure 5 plots distributions of change in the predicted probability for past yielding by potential targets across the five models in Figure 2.

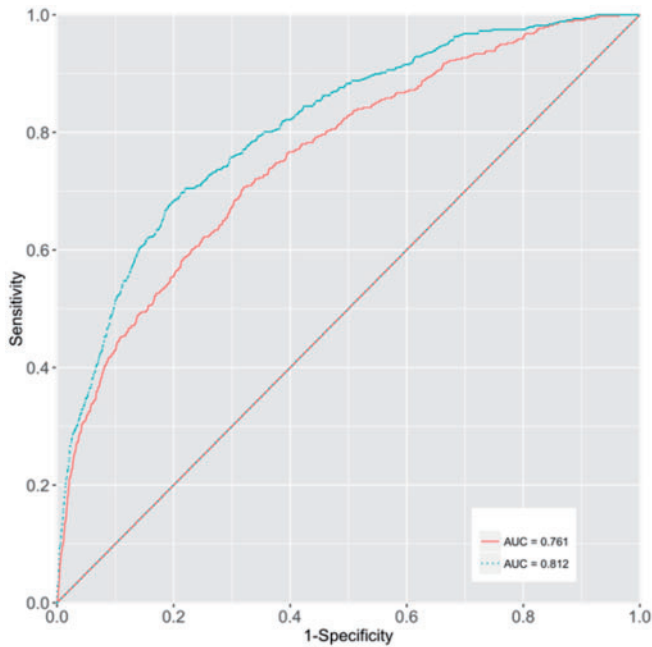


Fig. 6. Predictive Accuracy of Explanatory Variables.

Note: Figure 6 compares two receiver operating curves (ROC) that are based on Model 1 (i.e. the dotted line) of Figure 2 and a model with control variables only (the solid line, not shown).

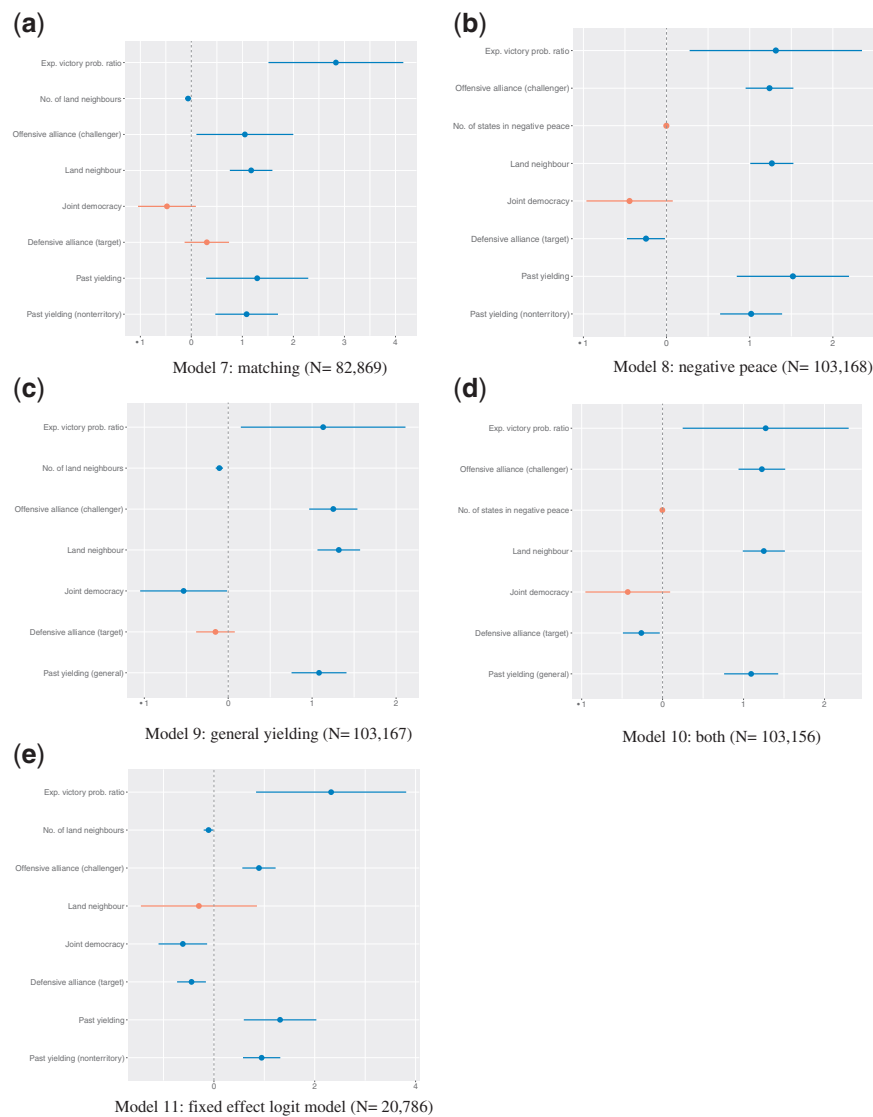


Fig. 7. Robustness Checks on Factors Affecting the Likelihood of Territorial Dispute Initiation by Weaker States.

- (a) Model 7: matching ($N = 82,869$)
(b) Model 8: negative peace ($N = 103,168$)
(c) Model 9: general yielding ($N = 103,167$)
(d) Model 10: both ($N = 103,156$)
(e) Model 11: fixed effect logit model ($N = 20,786$)

Note: Figure 7 plots the coefficients with 95% confidence intervals across Models 7–10. Standard errors in Models 7–10 are clustered by directed dyad. Model 11 estimates a logit model with a dyad fixed effect. The polynomial terms on peace years are excluded owing to space limitations.

capability. This evidence suggests that my theoretical framework and empirical analyses can improve our understanding of why relatively weaker states initiate territorial disputes against their stronger opponents.

Robustness Checks

As noted earlier, there might be a potential selection effect in the model, and the measure of the target state's future stake is subject to debate. I, thus, use three strategies to assess whether or not my analysis is robust to different measures of the independent variables as well as whether or not it is subject to selection bias. The results are summarised in Figure 7.

First, I use coarsened exact matching (CEM)¹¹⁵ to control for the potential unbalanced data and to control for non-random selection issues. To perform the matching, I use *joint democracy* as my 'treat' group, given its prevalence in the territorial conflict literature.¹¹⁶ Using the CEM approach, I matched cases based on *defensive alliance* (target), *offensive alliance* (challenger), *log of population* (target), *log of population* (challenger), *number of civil wars* (target), and *number of inter-state wars* (target). Once the balance is achieved, the same analysis in Model 1 is conducted, and the results are in Model 7 of Figure 7. As shown, the matched sample generally provides evidence that is consistent with, if not better than, the unmatched sample. Therefore, since the CEM results are consistent with the results, owing to space limitations I do not interpret them.

Secondly, I use alternative measures of the key explanatory variables. On one hand, instead of using the number of additional land neighbours as a measure of the potential target's strategic environment, I use the number of countries at negative peace with the potential target. Negative peace is superior to other measures in capturing the strategic environment, such as severe rivalries and less intense rivalries, because negative peace entails more uncertainty for the target state.¹¹⁷ In other words, the target state would in any event be inclined to fight if it were facing additional severe rivalries. On the other hand, I use a more general measure of reputation from Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo,¹¹⁸ which measures the target state's past surrenders in all

115 Ho, Imai, King and Stuart, 'Matching as Nonparametric Preprocessing for Reducing Model Dependence in Parametric Causal Inference', pp. 199–236.

116 Joint democracy is widely used as a control variable in the international conflict study, in part because of the democratic peace thesis. See Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Huth and Allee, *The Democratic Peace and Territorial Conflict in The Twentieth Century*. This variable may cause a potential selection effect in the original models; thus, using joint democracy as the outcome in the matching model can reduce such a bias. For a similar matching procedure, see James D. Morrow, 'When Do Defensive Alliances Provoke Rather than Deter?', *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (2017), pp. 341–5.

117 Gary Goertz, Paul F. Diehl and Alexandru Balas, *The Puzzle of Peace: The Evolution of Peace in the International System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

118 Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 'Revisiting Reputation', pp. 473–95.

militarised disputes. As shown in Models 8–10 of Figure 7, both alternative measures are consistent with the substantive findings in Model 1 of Figure 2.¹¹⁹

Thirdly, I use a fixed effect model with the same specification as Model 1. Thus far, all the regression models use pooled TSCS data, which have been criticised for ignoring the importance of unobserved differences across dyads.¹²⁰ I, thus, follow Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo¹²¹ and estimate a logit model with a dyad fixed effect. In the fixed effect model, when no territorial dispute occurs, such absence is ascribed to the dyad fixed effect, and all relevant observations are dropped from the analysis. Thus, we end up with a much smaller sample size. However, the main variables remain significant predictors of territorial dispute initiation, as shown in Model 11 of Figure 7. In sum, these robustness checks confirm my main findings.

Conclusion

As territorial disputes have long been considered the main driver of international conflict, they are often treated as a given in empirical analyses in the relevant IR literature. Moreover, much of the existing research focuses on the management and resolution of such conflicts rather than their initiation. This article takes a step back by examining the conditions under which weaker states are more likely to initiate a territorial claim in the first place.

The existing studies have correctly noted that the role of leaders, the internal and external security environment, and external support between the potential challenger and target countries can all affect a potential weaker state's decision to initiate a territorial dispute. In particular, the potential challenger is more likely to initiate a territorial claim when the potential target country has a new leader whose societal support groups are different from those of his predecessor. The likelihood of territorial dispute initiation by a potential challenger also increases significantly if the potential target country is facing severe security challenges, such as inter-state war. Moreover, I find that defensive alliances and offensive alliances have distinct effects on the likelihood of territorial dispute initiation. Specifically, an offensive alliance can embolden a challenger to initiate a dispute, while a defensive alliance can deter a potential challenger's aggressive behaviour. My approach in this article, however, diverges from those explanations.

To explain why weaker states are willing to initiate territorial disputes against relatively stronger states, I focus on how the information and uncertainty regarding the outcome of a territorial dispute can affect a potential challenger's decision to initiate the dispute in the first place. Specifically, drawing on recent findings on the role of reputation building in inter- and intra-state conflict, this article finds

119 The coefficients for *the number of states in negative peace* are negative and statistically significant at the 90% significance level.

120 Donald P. Green, Soo Yeon Kim and David H. Yoon, 'Dirty Pool', *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2001), pp. 441–68.

121 Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 'Revisiting Reputation', pp. 473–95.

that a potential weaker state's decision to initiate a territorial dispute against a relatively stronger state depends upon information about whether or not the potential stronger target has made accommodation(s) in past disputes and whether or not the potential stronger target may be expected to do so again in the future. These findings lend credence to the perspective wherein territorial dispute initiation and territorial dispute management may have different mechanisms, which is contrary to the conventional wisdom. Consequently, efforts to understand the resolution of territorial disputes might be needed to ascertain how these disputes were initiated in the first place and to compare how the historical records of a state's territorial dispute management can shed light on future territorial dispute management. Repeated challenges from relatively weaker neighbours directed at countries such as China may have occurred because such countries have yielded in past disputes or because their strategic environments imply the possibility that they would compromise again in the future.

This article is the first step towards understanding the dynamics of territorial disputes. The next step is to examine how stronger states respond to territorial claims made by relatively weaker states. We might need to focus on how the values attached to the disputed territory, the local power capabilities, and the security environment affect the strategies to manage or resolve such disputes. In particular, we might be interested in whether or not the weaker initiator stands to gain as much as it expected to when initiating the claim. These are questions well worth investigating in future research.

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