

What They Fight For: Specific Issues in Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816-2001

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Abstract

This paper provides a multifaceted classification of the primary issue for each state involved in territorial disputes between 1816 and 2001. I differentiate principally between cases in which ownership of the territory is disputed and cases over which status quo distributions of territory are acknowledged. I also consider the location of disputed territories—homeland versus other territories—and the types of actions in the dispute. This classification scheme produces categories such as (1) disputed ownership, (2) general border issues, (3) opportunity-based conflict, (4) state system changes, (5) border violations, and (6) fishing rights and the hot pursuit of rebels. My analyses find that there is significant variation across types of territorial disputes, and serious conflicts are overwhelmingly concentrated in fights over bordering territories with disputed ownership claims. I suggest several ways in which this classification scheme can be used in future research.

Keywords

Militarized Interstate Disputes, Territorial Issues, Classification

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The Correlates of War (CoW) Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) dataset divides conflicts among four specific issue codes—territory, policy, regime/government, and other. This division has proven to be important since a substantial number of studies have demonstrated that territorial issues are more difficult to resolve, more likely to repeat, more prone to fatalities, and more likely to cause wars than other types of issues.¹ Nevertheless, this simple distinction between territory and other types of issues still masks a great deal of variation within each category but especially among the broad category of territorial disputes.

Many familiar war cases began as territorial disputes—the First Gulf War (MID3957), the Falklands/Malvinas War (MID3630), Nagorno-Karabakh (MID3564), and World War II (MID0258)—but this category also includes some rather bizarre historical events that were coded as militarized incidents. Just a few examples include the 1893 incident in which French troops fired on British troops in West Africa, thinking they were fleeing members of the Sofa tribe (MID2300); the French very quickly apologized for their mistake. Or, in 1842, US Commander Jones misread newspaper reports and thought Mexico was aiding the British, so he sailed to Monterrey and took the city in the name of the United States, only to give it back two days later after he realized his mistake (MID2116). More recently, MID1367 codes cattle rustling by Ugandan troops against Kenya in 1973, and MID4237 describes a similar incident by South African forces directed at Lesotho in 1994. Each of these are territorial disputes in the dataset resting alongside the major territorial wars of the last two centuries.

Even a focus on the territorial wars reveals substantial heterogeneity across the cases. The First Gulf War was a broad coalition fighting against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Only Iraq and Kuwait were fighting a territorial issue as the coalition was trying to compel Iraq to respect the *ante bellum status quo*. Compare, too, the Falklands/Malvinas War to Nagorno-Karabakh. The Falklands/Malvinas are islands in the South Atlantic, former British colonies that were claimed by Argentina and became an issue following growing nationalistic pride among Argentine citizens. Nagorno-Karabakh, meanwhile, constitutes a struggle between two states—Armenia and Azerbaijan—defending claims to additional homeland territory and co-ethnic populations. The motivations for fighting these conflicts and the effects of the wars on the populations and institutions of the states involved are likely to be vastly different. Finally, none of these is quite similar to the world war that began with a predatory Germany searching for what it called *lebensraum*. It is an outlier in many ways but also shares some commonalities with the other war and dispute cases. These commonalities are not necessarily apparent, though, when grouped only according to the first revisionist issue in the conflict.

With this much variation across cases considered territorial, I think it is useful to reconceptualize what we call a territorial dispute. To do this I provide a comprehensive listing of the types of territorial issues that states fight over, dividing principally among the location of the contested territories and the level of uncertainty over their ownership. This differentiates among homelands, islands, and colonies, for example, while also noting that several types of border disputes, like border violations and seizures, may occur even when everyone agrees on the territorial distribution that exists. I demonstrate that the difference between coordination and distribution issues within territorial disputes can affect our understanding of which conflicts are more serious than others. I also speculate as to when border and peace agreements will work, in terms of both the timing and content of the agreements, and when conflicts will affect the institutions and domestic politics of the states involved.

The paper begins in the next section with a brief review of the development of the typology of

¹See, for example, the following studies and summaries: Holsti (1991), Vasquez (1993), Senese (1996), Hensel (2000), Vasquez and Henehan (2001), Vasquez (2001), Gibler (2012a,b).

issues we currently use, and I describe how my current work is affecting the MID dataset. I then introduce the description of territorial issues and present several expectations for how it can be used. Tests of several of these expectations confirm the usefulness of reconceptualizing territorial issues, and I close with the implications of the classification scheme for future research.

Background

The scholarly emphasis on territory as an important source of conflict really began with the publication of Vasquez (1993). Emphasizing Bremer’s (1992) finding of an incredibly strong correlation between contiguity and conflict—contiguous states were 35 times more likely to fight than non-contiguous states—Vasquez argued that borders were serving as a proxy for the presence of territorial issues. Granting that states may be more likely to fight because they border each other, Vasquez argued that there was also something innately different in how leaders handled territorial issues. The difference was that territorial issues were more likely to engender realist, power politics bargaining, and this bargaining made territorial issues prone to escalation and war.

At the time there was no easy way of testing the territorial argument because comprehensive issue data did not exist, but that changed quickly. CoW’s three-category issue typology was introduced by Jones, Bremer and Singer (1996, 178) with the following description:

Territory refers to an attempt by the revisionist state to gain control over a piece of turf that it claims but does not effectively possess. Policy denotes an effort by the revisionist state to change the foreign policy behavior of another state. Regime identifies the desire by the revisionist state to change the government of another state. When the objective was ambiguous, the code unclear was assigned.

The issue categories were primarily used to describe the actions of revisionist states in the dataset. Whether the state was trying to change the status quo took precedence over what the states were actually fighting about, and no actual analyses of the data were included in the piece. However, that changed quickly, too, as analyses of the territorial issue data grew rapidly in frequency and scope over the next decade. Almost all of these subsequent studies demonstrated the dangers associated with territorial issues. The MID data has now included the issue data in every single update of the dataset and has even attempted to apply issue codes to individual militarized incidents since Ghosn, Palmer and Bremer (2004).

Few have actually tried to discern differences across types of territorial issues. Two notable exceptions include Huth (2009) and Hensel (2001). Huth divided territories based on the possible value that each piece of land could provide. Strategic territories and land with ethnic brethren were found to be more likely than other territorial disputes to escalate to conflict. Hensel took this value differentiation a step further and created an index that identified the possible salience of the contested land based on its characteristics—resources, strategic nature, etc—and whether the territory was near the states or part of their homelands.²

²As Hensel (2001, 94) writes: “The ICOW territorial claims data set includes numerous variables that may be used to distinguish claims by issue salience, six of which are used here. Four involve the characteristics of the claimed territory: the presence of a permanent population, the (confirmed or believed) existence of valuable resources, strategic economic or military value of the territory’s location, and the existence of the challenger state’s ethnic and/or religious kinsmen. Two others involve the type of territory under contention: homeland territory rather than a dependency, and mainland rather than offshore territory. A claim to territory that includes substantial population and resources, has an economically or militarily strategic location, or is at least partially based on ethnic and/or religious bases is considered to be more salient than a claim lacking these characteristics, because leaders should be more reluctant to give up a source of potentially valuable resources, substantial population, or ethnic/religious kinsmen. A territory

The index is an incredibly useful way of thinking about territorial claims, but there is one problem for my purposes when discussing actual militarized conflict. It combines indicators of *what* states fight over with indicators of *why* they are fighting. This is important because the characteristics of the territory will likely be endogenous with the types of actions a state takes. Fights for control of territory may be more likely when resources are present, and leaders will more often try to occupy the land. Meanwhile, contested borders over land with little actual value may be more likely to provoke harassment strategies of repeated violations, seizures, and the like, and other pieces of territory may lead to strategies that try to deny the rival control of the land. Too, land often becomes strategic when defined by a rivalry as strategic; without the rivalry, though, the nature of the territory changes dramatically. As I outline in the next section, I treat the rationale for fighting over territory as exogenous to a combination of the type of territory the states fight over and the actions that states take to fight the issue.

What States Fight Over—Types of Territorial Issues

My research team has now compiled narrative data for each case of the MID dataset as part of a six-year and ongoing research effort. We have also corrected much of the original dataset, providing a listing and rationale for cases that should be dropped, cases that should be merged with other disputes, and the disputes we could not find in the historical record (see [Gibler, Miller and Little N.d.](#)). This revised dataset provides the basis for the collection of militarized incidents in the MID dataset that we are currently generating, extending the incident data to 1816.³

As we collected the narrative and incident data, we noticed a great deal of variation in the types of issues states fight over, even within the categories listed by CoW as issue types: territory, policy, regime/government, and other. To better describe this variation, I created a comprehensive list of the types of issues over which states fight, beginning with the cases labeled territorial issues in the MID data. Figure 1 provides an example of the base data I used for much of this issue-type coding.

I picked the five sample narratives in Figure 1 to provide some variation in the types of issues over which states contend. Note that each case provides the original CoW issue coding for the dispute number, the states involved, and the issues under contention. The line marked “issues” lists the new issue codes I gave each state involved in the dispute, and I also provide an assessment of the level of threat each state likely derived from the dispute. This is followed by the narrative that details what actually happened during the dispute. These narratives often provide enough detail to classify the overall issue in contention, but, when more information was needed, I referred to the source material that was used to generate the narratives.

There are 885 participants involved in 570 territorial disputes between 1816 to 2001. Of these MIDs, we demonstrate that 36 should be dropped from the dataset, and another 25 should be merged with other disputes cases. We could not find two of the original territorial disputes. This leaves 507 territorial disputes to be coded for specific issues.

lacking in these respects is considered less salient and should be much easier to resolve, because it has fewer valuable characteristics that could motivate leaders to continue their claim, and thus fewer obstacles to ending the claim peacefully. Similarly, a territory that one or both sides consider to be part of their homeland is likely to be more salient than one that both sides claim as dependent territory. Finally, *ceteris paribus*, mainland territory is likely to be seen as more salient than offshore territory, because of its more direct connection to the state’s identity and security.”

³The purpose of the incident-level data is to facilitate analyses of bargaining within disputes. Currently, we have only summary measures of what took place during each conflict, so the new dataset provides incident-level data and matches each incident with the rival state’s incident that provoked it (if applicable). We have completed coding on all disputes lasting less than one year and should have the complete incident data, 1816 to 2010, finished by the summer of 2016. See National Science Foundation awards #1260492 and #0923406 for more details.

Figure 1: Sample Narratives Used for Coding Issues

MID0002

Participants: 2-United States (Territory)/200-United Kingdom (Territory)

Issues: 2-United States (Border delimitation)/200-United Kingdom (Disputed colony)

Threat to homeland: None

Narrative: MID0002 is the Alaska boundary dispute between the United States and the United Kingdom, which, by that time, controlled Canada's foreign affairs. The border between Alaska and Canada had been a gray area throughout the 19th century. Russia and the United Kingdom, which then controlled Alaska and Canada outright, had disputed interpretations of where the boundary between the two was. The United States simply inherited the problem from Russia following the Alaska purchase. The matter between the US and the UK was being discussed through the 1890s, but the United States – out of respect – backed off the matter while Britain was mired with its South African problems. In January 1903, the matter came to a close when both sides agreed to a convention of six jurists – 3 from both sides – charged with fixing the boundary. This was the Hay-Herbert Treaty. The following decision was an almost perfect compromise between the maximal claims of the US and the maximal claims of Britain.

MID0077

Participants: 200-United Kingdom (Territory)/220-France (Not applicable)

Issues: 200-United Kingdom (Disputed colony)/220-France (Disputed colony)

Threat to homeland: None

Narrative: MID0077 is the Fashoda Crisis, which brought the British and the French to the brink of war over their respective possessions in Africa. The “Scramble for Africa” included several European powers, but both France and Britain played the lead. Their respective possessions constituted the largest share of Africa, and the ambitions of both were equally as grandiose. Britain had ambitions for a Cape-Cairo railway to link its possessions from Egypt to present day South Africa. France, meanwhile, had aspirations of connecting Senegal to Djibouti. Their paths crossed in disputed Sudan. A mission under Jean-Baptiste Marchand was sent to Fashoda (now known as Kodok in Sudan) and reached its destination on July 10, 1898. The British, dissatisfied with the French move, sent Sir Herbert Kitchener to Fashoda, where he arrived on September 18, 1898. Kitchener pressed Marchand to leave; Marchand refused. While the actual dispute occurring in Fashoda was rather mild, the imperialist fever in Paris and London almost brought both states to war. However, France felt weakened amidst the fallout of the Dreyfus Affair and ultimately yielded to British pressure. On November 3, 1898, Paris gave the order to evacuate Fashoda. A March 21, 1899, accord between the two was later signed. France agreed to relinquish all claims to the Nile in exchange for almost valueless districts in the Sahara.

MID1268

Participants: 315-Czechoslovakia (Territory)/290-Poland (Territory)

Issues: 315-Czechoslovakia (Disputed border area)/290-Poland (Disputed border area)

Threat to homeland: High for Poland

Narrative: MID1268 describes the Poland-Czechoslovakia War, also known as the Seven-Day War. It is a dispute that took place from January 23, 1919 to February 1, 1919 over a piece of territory called Cieszyn Silesia which is an area on the Polish and Czech border that both sides claimed after the armistice at the end of World War I. After the war, the Czech decided that Cieszyn Silesia was rightfully theirs, and issued an ultimatum to the Polish side demanding that they move back to an area around the Biala River. The Poles refused, and the dispute officially started when Czech soldiers crossed into the Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia in an attempt to prevent a Polish election. By January 27, the entire piece of territory was occupied by the Czechs without resistance. The Czechs continued to gain territory in Poland until January 31, when the Polish army finally stopped the Czech advance and the Entente pressured the Czechs to stop fighting. The Czech army withdrew to the new Green Line that was established by an international commission agreement signed on February 3, 1919. The territory of Cieszyn Silesia was permanently divided in July 1920 at the Spa Conference.

MID2179

Participants: 350-Greece (Not applicable)/640-Turkey (Territory)

Issues: 350-Greece (Disputed maritime area)/640-Turkey (Disputed maritime area)

Threat to homeland: None

Narrative: This dispute is centered on the demarcation of Greece and Turkey's respective continental shelves in the Aegean Sea and the extent of their territorial waters. On July 29, 1986, the Greek government protested against what it saw as a violation of its territorial waters by a Turkish scientific research vessel. The following day, the Turkish government lodged a complaint that Greek naval and air forces had harassed the vessel in international waters. Tensions increased on September 16, when Greece alleged that Turkish warships had fired five volleys close to a Greek patrol boat in international waters close to the island of Lesbos. In March of 1987, further incidents took place over territorial waters in the Aegean. Greece protested the course of a Turkish vessel as provocative, while Turkey complained of the harassment of the vessel. It was about this time that a private Greek company, the North Aegean Petroleum Company, began to move toward drilling sixteen kilometers east of Thassos, in international waters. Turkey proclaimed that it would do “whatever is necessary” if NAPC began drilling in international waters. On March 25, the Turkish government decided to begin its own oil prospecting outside of Turkish territorial waters. The Greek government then warned Turkey that if it decided to drill outside of its customary jurisdiction, Greece would take the necessary measures to protect its sovereign rights. On March 28, although a petroleum vessel entered into international waters with a naval escort, the Turkish government, later in the day, said that the escort had been removed and that no Turkish oil operations would take place in international waters. The same day, the Greek government gave assurances that NAPC would not operate outside of Greek territorial waters.

MID3987

Participants: 130-Ecuador (Territory)/135-Peru (Not applicable)

Issues: 130-Ecuador (Disputed border area)/135-Peru (Disputed border area)

Threat to homeland: Low for both states

Narrative: MID3987 is another in a long-running series over the Cordillera del Condor, 125,000 square miles of disputed territory between Ecuador and Peru on the edge of the Amazon. Only a small portion of the border remained in dispute in October 1991—that between Cusumaza-Bumbuiza and Yaupi-Santiago markers. Although tensions between Ecuador and Peru had been running high since August, this militarized dispute began on 6 October 1991 when a Peruvian helicopter gunship flew over Ecuadorian military installations Soldado Monge and Teniente Ortiz. Peru also arrested three Ecuadorians and alleged them to be spies. Peru declined Ecuador's call for papal mediation; Ecuador in turn rejected Peru's call for mediation by the guarantors of the Rio Protocol (1942). On 8 October the other members of the Andean Pact—Bolivia, Colombia, and Venezuela—called for peaceful resolution to the conflict. Two days later (10/10) the Peruvian and Ecuadorian foreign ministers announced new talks over the disputed territory; Peruvian foreign minister Torres y Torres announced, “we are on the right track.” By 13 October Peruvian and Ecuadorian troops withdrew from the disputed border. Ecuador subsequently sent envoys to seek mediation from Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile. On 31 October Bolivia agreed to mediate the dispute with encouragement from Mexico and Venezuela.

CoW codes the revisionist state in each dispute and then codes the revision type for each of the revisionist states. When both states are revisionist, then both participants are coded for issue type. I take a slightly different tack when coding the issues involved in the dispute. Rather than beginning with revisionist, which is often difficult to discern *ex ante*, I instead code only whether the dispute was an issue for each state and what type of issue it was. Thus, for example, State A's air force jet may mistakenly fly over the border of State B, and State B responds with a show of force. There really is no revisionist state in this incident, and there really is no issue for State A since the border violation was unplanned. However, the border violation was an issue for State B. This type of emphasis on issues rather than revision produces many more specific issue codings than in the original MID dataset since each participant is almost always coded with an issue rather than CoW's use of the "Not Applicable" category.

Devising Classifications of Territorial Issues

As Hensel (2001) argues, it is important to distinguish the type of territory in dispute and its connection to the homeland territory of the state. Fighting over the border of a state's homeland will take on a different qualitative character than a fight over a colonial territory or a far away island. This difference manifests itself in the latent rationale for fighting—after all, it is hard to generate nationalist support for far away lands—but it also matters for how the territory will be contested. Force projection is more difficult as distance from the state grows, and this is especially true for land forces.

Territorial disputes also differ in the underlying certainty one or both states have regarding the ownership of the disputed lands. For example, border violations are, by definition, transgressions across accepted borders. They are much different from conflicts over territories whose ownership is in doubt. Leaders may wish to signal their resolve toward defending disputed territories by sending troops, ships, or aircraft, but those same actions over accepted borders are more likely to challenge the regime itself. More than this, a border violation, in isolation, does not carry the same type of implicit threat to the regime. Variation in the underlying certainty of a border provides a straightforward dichotomy between types of contestations, and, when combined with the location of the territory in dispute, provides the basis for my classification system.

Table 1 lists the seven general categories of territorial dispute issues.⁴ Territory in which no state has clear sovereign authority is considered to be disputed territory, and that territory can rest on a state's border or be an island, colony, or maritime area. There are also several cases in which a territory is disputed but not connected to the homeland territory of one or more of the disputing states; Turkey's claims to Cyprus is an example of this. Only disputed territories on the border will have an effect on whether the homeland territories of the state are likely to be threatened.

General border issues represent another set of disputes in which the ownership of the land is in question. Cases of delimitation, for example, are just that—the states are involved in militarized conflict as a means of determining where the border between them actually is. These differ from cases of disputed border areas as the former refers to specific pieces of territory (the Chaco, the Ifni region, etc) rather than the border itself. The second subcategory of border tensions is somewhat a product of the MID coding rules that aggregate militarized incidents temporally, as a dispute can include border violations, seizures, buildups, and other types of incidents in the same dispute. However, this category also contains generally conflictual relations between two states that have become militarized.

⁴The Appendix provides a codebook for these issue codings. Initial inter-coder reliability analyses suggest a great deal of consistency as well. Using two separate samples of 20 bilateral disputes, coding agreement was 85% in one reliability check and 95% in another. The codebook was revised following these tests to eliminate some ambiguities.

Opportunity-based territorial conflict implies one state taking advantage of another state or the current political environment, and I differentiate among several types of opportunities. Revanchism refers to states that seek to redress previous territorial losses. There are also situations in which neighboring states take advantage of one of their neighbors who is in distress, as Italy and Spain did in 1940, when Germany was overrunning France. Both countries gained territories when France was unable to respond. World War II also witnessed quite a bit of predatory behavior, from Germany and other states, and I linked these types of disputes with the state-making disputes associated with Italy and Prussia in the 18th Century. Both cases follow a similar logic of adding territory to make a greater state. Finally, the general conflict cases describe the situations in which states use a regional or world conflict environment to their advantage, taking territories because their will likely be little opposition from other major states and, possibly, the norms of acquisition have changed.

State-system changes can affect the certainty of borders in many ways. New states, such as Israel, create uncertain borders and displace populations. New regimes can also affect borders as revolutionary states dismiss previously-agreed boundaries or neighbors preemptively fear such changes; the Bolshevik revolution in Russia created this type of situation as the Soviets rejected many of Czarist Russia's boundaries. The decline of Czarist Russia also provides an example of what can happen as empires weaken—the demise of Imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, the Ottoman Empire, and Austro-Hungary, each created uncertain political changes that increased uncertainty in where borders actually were.

Many of the disputes in the dataset are simple border violations. Both states accept the delineation of the border, but, for one reason or another, the border line was crossed by the targeting state. These violations can take place over land, through the air, on the water, or a mix of all three. When violations are multiple and mixed, I code according to the most numerous that occurred in the dispute.

Notice that I have separated several descriptions in Table 1 above the other categories. Some states have no real issue in the dispute; instead, their rival's issue controls what the states are fighting over. The protest-only disputes are described extensively in [Gibler and Little \(N.d.\)](#). These are the cases in which no actual state-to-state fighting took place. Instead, one state targeted another state's citizen(s) and that citizen's sovereign responded with a formal protest. I treat these differently because they are different; no actual fighting is taking place. There are also several disputes that can best be described as accidents in which one state mistakenly engaged in a military confrontation. MID1842 is a perfect example of this, as it codes the case of a US warship captain misreading the news and taking the city of Monterrey from Mexico—the United States apologized for the incident. Finally, homeland defense refers to those cases when a state's territory is targeted by another state whose goal is to conquer the territory. Germany's neighbors at the start of World War II are coded with homeland defense issues, while Germany itself was a predatory state.

Describing the Various Types of Territorial Issues and Their Likely Effects

Table 1 provides three additional columns of information that are divided by the categories in the classification scheme. The third column lists the likely level of uncertainty in the territorial distribution between the states prior to the dispute. High levels of uncertainty are more likely when the issue is a disputed territory—on the border, an island, a colony, maritime area, or other. Border delimitation issues also suggest distributional issues between the states, and revanchist issues hint to at least some disagreement over ownership. Finally, state system changes upset the status quo distribution of territory, or at least can upset that distribution, and these disputes are likely to concern high levels of uncertainty over the placement of borders.

I will test whether these distributional issues are more dangerous than other types of territorial

Table 1: Types of Territorial Issues in Militarized Interstate Disputes

Code	Description	Uncertainty of Territorial Distribution	Influence on Homeland Territory	Emphasis of Agreements
0	None			
1	Accidents/Other			
5	Protest only			
10	Homeland defense		Targeted state	
<i>Disputed ownership of territory</i>				
21	Border area	High	Both states	Distribution
22	Island	High		Distribution
23	Colony	High		Distribution
24	Maritime area	High		Distribution
25	Other	High		Distribution
<i>General border issues</i>				
31	Delimitation	High	Both states	Distribution
32	Border tensions		Both states	
<i>Opportunity-based territorial conflict</i>				
41	Revanchism	Medium	Targeted state	Not relevant
42	Weak state		Targeted state	Not relevant
43	Predatory/state-making		Targeted state	Not relevant
44	General conflict		Targeted state	Not relevant
<i>State system changes</i>				
51	New state(s)	High	Both states	Distribution
52	New regime(s)	High	Both states	Distribution
53	Disintegrating state/empire	High	Targeted state	Distribution
<i>Border violations</i>				
61	Land			Coordination
62	Maritime			Coordination
63	Air			Coordination
<i>Other territory-related issues</i>				
71	Fishing rights			Coordination
72	Rebels/insurgents			Coordination

fighters in the remainder of the piece. Before proceeding, however, I also provide two additional columns of expectations that are deduced from the nature of the classifications. The first concerns the likely effects of each dispute class, and the second suggests when and what types of agreements are necessary to settle each issue.

First, for those interested in the effects of territorial conflict, there are several types of disputes that will affect the homelands of either or both states in a dyadic conflict. Homeland defense issues will of course be of concern to targeted states; those conflicts stemming from capability-based opportunities should also have repercussions for the targeted states of these disputes. Finally, issues related to a disintegrating empire are cases in which leaders take advantage of the demise of an empire and target that former empire, which will likely increase the threat to that target's homeland. Meanwhile, both states are likely to infer threats from distributional issues that affect the homeland—these are the disputed border areas, delimitation issues, and border tensions and also include the uncertainty that follows regime changes and new states. Target and initiator status becomes muddled in these cases as both states are strongly affected by the conflict.

The final column of Table 1 describes the types of issues that will be important for any agreements that attempt to resolve the dispute class. Distributional issues will often be most difficult to resolve since they require agreement on which state receives the claimed territory. These are much different cases from the coordination-related issues. Border violations, fights over fishing rights, and the hot pursuit of rebels often result from poor demarcation of territories—land or marine—and agreements that specify these demarcations and implement easy ways of identifying these salients should be effective. Important here is the argument that the status quo is not in question in these disputes, and borders can remain settled even though the states are involved in a territorial dispute. Last, agreements have little relevance for the opportunity-based conflicts. These are most often power grabs and, by definition, ignore the existing distribution of territory. Old or new agreements will have little effect in these cases.

Predictors of Territorial Dispute Types

My first set of analyses examines what best predicts each type of territorial issue. This serves two, somewhat contradictory purposes. First, my coding of the issue types was based on the events that occurred in the disputes as well as what the leaders and policymakers were saying at the time. The issue types were inductively derived from the data, and, therefore, there could be bias toward labeling cases according to preconceived expectations. Analyzing the predictors of conflict provides good information that guards against this type of endogeneity in additional analyses. That said, I have several published arguments that expect a correlation between democracies and certain types of territorial disputes—if democracies are involved in territorial disputes at all (see [Gibler 2012b](#)). I argue that democracies are more likely to have settled borders, especially democracies that border other democracies, and this should provide an association between democracies and non-distributional territorial issues. Though I did not closely examine the democracy data prior to coding the dispute cases, I do expect endogeneity here, and, therefore, any regime-based relationships I uncover do not necessarily demonstrate strong evidence for my published arguments.⁵

I divide the territory cases among the five most numerous types—disputed ownership, delimitation, opportunity cases, system changes, and border violations—and use several common correlates

⁵This is why I also specified additional hypotheses in the last section regarding the effects of certain types of territorial issues on the state and the effects of border agreements. Testing these arguments will provide much stronger evidence that any regime-focused endogeneity is not by coding design. In this paper I focus on describing and analyzing the differences across types.

Table 2: Predictors of Territorial Dispute Type, 1816-2001

Outcome:	Disputed Ownership	Delimitation	Opportunity Cases	System Changes	Border Violations
Contiguity	3.357*** (0.148)	5.601*** (0.337)	4.075*** (0.367)	4.046*** (0.363)	5.029*** (0.331)
State A is democracy	0.318 (0.180)	0.070 (0.270)	-1.079* (0.536)	-0.258 (0.380)	0.290 (0.344)
State B is democracy	0.343 (0.181)	0.491* (0.229)	-0.232 (0.450)	0.114 (0.353)	1.356*** (0.242)
Joint democracy	-0.720* (0.343)	-1.236* (0.534)			-0.614 (0.476)
Defense pact	0.123 (0.198)	0.068 (0.221)	-0.755 (0.548)	-0.253 (0.450)	0.196 (0.262)
Capability share (State A)	0.333 (0.198)	0.124 (0.274)	2.452*** (0.599)	0.694 (0.460)	0.063 (0.312)
Constant	-7.978*** (0.189)	-10.262*** (0.381)	-11.523*** (0.611)	-9.877*** (0.458)	-10.083*** (0.388)
<i>N</i>	1,352,358	1,352,358	1,352,358	1,352,358	1,352,358

Logit analyses of directed-dyads, 1816-2001; peace years and splines not reported.

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

of dispute onset in a sample of all directed dyads from 1816 to 2001. I include the dyadic capability share of State A, joint democracy, and a defense pact between the two states as predictors.⁶ Also, since there are expectations in the literature regarding the behavior of democratic challengers and targets (Schultz 2001, Gibler and Hutchison 2013), I include two dummy variables that identify the presence of a democracy in State A and in State B; this makes joint democracy an interaction of these two components. Finally, the peace years between disputes and cubic splines of the peace-year measure are included in the estimation, and the results are listed in Table 2.

Contiguity predicts each issue type well, of course, but no other variable provides a consistent effect. Capability share predicts opportunity cases well but is not associated with any other issue type. Defense pacts are not statistically significant in any of the models.

Democracies are less likely to begin opportunity-based conflicts but are more likely to be the target of delimitation disputes and border violations. I estimated an additional model (not included in the table) for the delimitation cases that controlled for whether the targeted democracy was involved in a fight over one of its colonies, and this eliminated the association between democracies and delimitation issues. The border violation cases may result from infrastructure differences across regime types as wealthier democracies may be better able to catch and respond to border violations, but I did not test that here.

As expected, jointly democratic dyads do not fight over disputed border areas and are unlikely to be involved in disputes related to border delimitation. There are also no cases of opportunity-based conflict or conflicts related to state system changes between democracies either, which is

⁶Capability share uses Composite Index of National Capability Data from Singer, Bremer and Stuckey (1972). Contiguity data is taken from (Stinnett et al. 2002). Joint democracy is coded as present when both states have a combined score of 6 or more on the 21-point, combined democracy-autocracy scale from Polity IV (Marshall and Jaggers 2002). Defense pacts are coded using Gibler (2009).

why joint democracy is omitted from those two models. I argue that democracies do not fight over disputed borders, and this evidence is consistent with that; however, once again, I cannot discount the potential for coding bias in these cases.

Overall, these results suggest that only in a few cases are we to suspect endogeneity between the correlates of dispute initiation and the various actions and rhetoric that took place in the dispute. Structure predicts conflict in only a few cases, and this makes it possible to analyze whether certain types of disputes are more likely than others to be serious. The next two sections do just that—first using descriptive statistics and then turning to inferential analyses using a selection model predicting two types of serious disputes.

The Distribution of Territorial Issue Types

Table 3 provides the distribution of dispute cases by territorial issue type. The first column of summaries provides the number of disputes by State A’s issue type, and then the next two columns sorts these disputes based on fatality levels, either one or more fatalities for State A or more than 1,000 fatalities for State A. The percentages of the total column summaries are in parentheses next to each value.

Note first that a large number of the CoW-labeled territory cases include protest-only disputes (2.46%), cases that should be dropped from the dataset (6.32%), cases that should be merged with other disputes (4.39%), and accidents and disputes that could not be found (0.35% each). Few of these cases reach the level of fatalities, and none results in a war. So it would seem that previous findings may be underestimating the effects of territorial disputes on the likelihood of conflict, especially serious conflicts involving fatalities, since 15% of the dataset is comprised of these special cases.

Two categories form a plurality of the disputes and dominate the cases likely to result in fatalities or war. More than one out of every six MIDs concerns a disputed border area, and these cases account for 23% of the fatal MIDs and 60% of the wars. In other words fights over control of a cohesive territorial area or region—the Chaco, Kashmir, etc—are one of the most dangerous territorial issues between states. Another, similar issue type are contests over border delimitation. These conflicts account for more dispute cases than border area fights (at almost 19%) but slightly fewer fatal MIDs (16% of the cases) and many fewer actual wars (13%). Together, the summary statistics for these two issue types demonstrate well that distributional territorial issues are among the most serious types of interstate disagreement.

The placement of the border issue matters, too, as the summaries of other disputed-ownership cases demonstrates. None of the fights over islands, maritime areas, or other types of territory result in war, and the likelihood of fatalities for these cases is about one in three. Disputed colonies escalate at a very high rate, but, thankfully, the most recent of these cases involves the fight over Manchuria that began in 1931.

Border uncertainty also matters when there are state system changes. These disputes are not a large part of the dataset—only about 7% of the cases—but over half of these disputes involve fatalities and 17% of the wars are related to these issues. This may even be an understated correlation since I coded the disputes between Israel and its neighbors as “disputed/other” issues after 1952 or five years following the entrance of the Israeli state into the system. Nevertheless, much of the rhetoric in these conflicts since then refer to the newness and illegality of the Israeli state.

A high rate of escalation can also be found among certain cases of opportunity-driven conflict. Cumulatively, these cases represent less than 6% of all disputes, but they also account for more than

Table 3: Distribution of Territorial Issue Types by Fatality Level, 1816-2001

Code	Description	# Disputes	# Fatal MIDs	# Wars
0	None	1 (0.18%)		
1	Accidents/Other	2 (0.35%)		
5	Protest only	14 (2.46%)		
	<i>Could not find</i>	2 (0.35%)		
	<i>Merge</i>	25 (4.39%)	14 (6.25%)	
	<i>Drop</i>	36 (6.32%)	6 (2.68%)	
10	Homeland defense	5 (0.88%)	4 (1.79%)	1 (3.33%)
<i>Disputed ownership of territory</i>				
21	Border area	96 (16.84%)	52 (23.21%)	14 (60.00%)
22	Island	52 (9.12%)	13 (5.80%)	
23	Colony	23 (4.04%)	10 (4.46%)	4 (13.33%)
24	Maritime area	6 (1.05%)	1 (0.45%)	
25	Other	5 (0.88%)		
<i>General border issues</i>				
31	Delimitation	107 (18.77%)	36 (16.07%)	4 (13.33%)
32	Border tensions	36 (6.32%)	18 (8.04%)	
<i>Opportunity-based territorial conflict</i>				
41	Revanchism	3 (0.53%)	2 (0.89%)	1 (3.33%)
42	Weak state	4 (0.70%)		
43	Predatory/state-making	20 (3.51%)	8 (3.57%)	1 (3.33%)
44	General conflict	10 (1.75%)	7 (3.12%)	
<i>State system changes</i>				
51	New state(s)	18 (3.16%)	11 (4.91%)	3 (10.00%)
52	New regime(s)	10 (1.75%)	10 (4.46%)	
53	Disintegrating state/empire	12 (2.11%)	8 (3.57%)	2 (6.67%)
<i>Border violations</i>				
61	Land	40 (7.02%)	17 (7.59%)	
62	Maritime	8 (1.40%)	1 (0.45%)	
63	Air	16 (2.81%)		
<i>Other territory-related issues</i>				
71	Fishing rights	1 (0.18%)		
72	Rebels/insurgents	5 (0.88%)	4 (1.79%)	
100	Non-territorial issues	13 (2.28%)	3 (1.34%)	
Totals:		570	224	30

6% of all territorial wars. Again, though, these cases are not recent. Germany before World War II provides the most modern predatory cases. Revanchism involves two World War II-era fights but also a dispute between Pakistan and India in 1972. The general conflict cases involve only one case after World War II (in 1949), and the weak state cases involve two 19th century disputes and two cases in which France’s neighbors took territory as Germany was marching toward Paris in 1940. Territory in each of the four weak-state disputes was taken as *fait accomplis* since no fatalities were coded.

Finally, cases of border violations represent only about 10% of all conflicts, and few of these escalate to the point of fatalities. This is also true for the rebel-related issues and fishing rights cases. Both represent minor portions of the territorial fights in the dataset, few escalations, and no wars. I was not able to confirm the coding of a territorial issue in about 2.5% of the dispute cases. These were also not very serious disputes since only three of the fourteen cases had fatalities, and the fatalities in these cases were at the lowest coded level of 1-25 deaths.

Demonstrating differences across territorial dispute types

I assess the correlates of more serious disputes with a heckman-type model.⁷ The uncensored observations in the outcome equation correspond to two different types of serious dispute: fatal disputes that included at least one military fatality and wars that included 1,000 or more related battle-deaths. The base predictors of serious disputes include the same dummy variables for contiguity, joint democracy, and defense pacts, and also the dyadic share of capabilities held by State A. These same variables are in the outcome equation, except for the peace year measures, and I again distinguish between the level of democracy in each state of the dyad with two dummy variables, which makes the joint democracy measure an interaction. I also differentiate across type of conflict with dummies for territorial disputes, policy disputes, and regime/government disputes. Other and not applicable become the omitted categories of dispute type in the analyses.

Finally, I use the dummy variables for territorial dispute type from above. I expect more serious disputes to occur when territory’s ownership is disputed, not necessarily when borders are transgressed. Disputed ownership, delimitation, and system changes denote cases in which ownership was unclear, and opportunity disputes, border violations, or cases involving the hot pursuit of rebels can occur even when borders are settled. I omit fishing disputes from these analyses because of collinearity—there were no wars or fatal disputes in the data involving territory that primarily concerned fishing rights. Table 4 present estimates from the four models.

The results of the selection equations remain nearly identical across each model tested. Contiguity is a strong predictor of the likelihood of a dispute, while the presence of joint democracy predicts peace, and the likelihood of conflict increases with State A’s share of the capabilities. Only the presence of a defense pact is not significant in any of the models. Generally, these are consistent with most research on dispute initiation.

Once again, I estimate two different dispute outcomes—the presence of a fatal dispute and the presence of a war—both of which are based on the fatalities incurred by State A. Technically, only the latter dependent variable identifies escalation consistently since there are many one-incident disputes with fatalities in the data, but the separate outcomes provide an excellent way of identifying trends among the more serious conflicts in the dataset. For example, the presence of a regime dispute or a territorial dispute is correlated with both fatal disputes and wars, while policy disputes are not. Policy disputes actually are associated with fewer fatal disputes than we would normally observe on average but provide no leverage on predictions of war. The non-dispute-type variables do a

⁷Specifically, I estimate the analyses in Table 4 using the *heckprob* command in Stata 13.

Table 4: Determinants of Dispute Escalation, 1816 to 2001

Outcome:	Fatal MID	Fatal MID	War	War
Contiguity	0.130 (0.143)	0.153 (0.145)	-0.091 (0.210)	-0.015 (0.212)
State A is democracy	0.006 (0.088)	0.008 (0.088)	-0.130 (0.126)	-0.123 (0.128)
State B is democracy	-0.031 (0.086)	-0.023 (0.087)	-0.302* (0.138)	-0.319* (0.144)
Joint democracy	-0.292 (0.176)	-0.276 (0.176)	-0.214 (0.328)	-0.184 (0.337)
Defense pact	-0.168 (0.095)	-0.171 (0.095)	-0.337* (0.159)	-0.335* (0.160)
Capability share (State A)	-0.204 (0.106)	-0.217* (0.107)	0.212 (0.163)	0.170 (0.166)
Policy dispute	-0.259** (0.087)	-0.253** (0.084)	0.073 (0.141)	0.091 (0.134)
Regime dispute	0.420** (0.140)	0.429** (0.138)	0.809*** (0.187)	0.823*** (0.181)
Territorial dispute	0.256** (0.083)		0.526*** (0.133)	
<i>Type of territorial dispute</i>				
Disputed ownership		0.369*** (0.103)		0.728*** (0.145)
Delimitation dispute		0.215 (0.129)		0.274 (0.212)
Opportunity dispute		0.123 (0.228)		0.374 (0.319)
System changes		0.775*** (0.200)		1.166*** (0.236)
Border violations		-0.051 (0.168)		
Rebels/hot pursuit		0.843 (0.482)		
Constant	-0.113 (0.364)	-0.129 (0.364)	-1.640** (0.553)	-1.746** (0.552)
<i>N (uncensored)</i>	1,975	1,975	1,975	1,975
Contiguity	1.180*** (0.018)	1.180*** (0.018)	1.181*** (0.018)	1.181*** (0.018)
Joint democracy	-0.077* (0.030)	-0.077* (0.030)	-0.077* (0.030)	-0.077* (0.030)
Defense pact	0.026 (0.027)	0.026 (0.027)	0.026 (0.027)	0.026 (0.027)
Capability share (State A)	0.246*** (0.023)	0.246*** (0.023)	0.246*** (0.023)	0.246*** (0.023)
Constant	-2.718*** (0.020)	-2.718*** (0.020)	-2.718*** (0.020)	-2.718*** (0.020)
ρ	-0.247* (0.102)	-0.246* (0.103)	-0.061 (0.151)	-0.031 (0.153)
<i>N (censored)</i>	1,352,358	1,352,358	1,352,358	1,352,358

Heckman-type estimates of directed-dyads, 1816-2001; peace years and splines not reported. Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

relatively poor job of discerning dispute severity. Only the presence of a democracy in the targeted state and a defense pact between both states are statistically significant in any models, and both of these variables are inconsistent across the two types of outcomes.

The importance of differentiation is evident when comparing the base models of fatal disputes and wars to the models that include specific territorial issues. Territorial issues generally predict both fatalities and war, but focusing on disputed ownership produces an effect that is almost 50% greater; system changes have an effect that is more than double the average for territorial disputes.⁸ Delimitation and opportunity disputes have a positive but not statistically significant effect on more serious disputes, and the latter becomes statistically significant when the analyses are limited to 1816 to 1945. Also important to note is that border violations are not at all associated with more serious disputes. The standard error for these cases is three times the size of the coefficient and has to be omitted from the war model. There are no wars that follow border violations or rebel pursuits.

These results confirm a great deal of variation across territorial dispute cases. Conflicts that begin over disputed ownership issues, especially disputed border issues, are likely to have higher fatalities than other disputes and other territorial disputes. This is also true for cases of state system change. Including border violations, rebel pursuits, fishing rights cases, and other types of low-level territorial conflicts as part of analyses of territorial conflict has dampened the very strong correlation between distributive issues and conflict.

Implications

The classification scheme I have developed can be used in multiple ways, but I would again like to emphasize two types of possible extensions. First, I outlined how disputed territories can often affect the institutions and behavior of the states involved. Previous research, such as [Gibler \(2012b\)](#), has considered the effects of territorial disputes as a whole, without disaggregation among the various types. However, the demonstrated variation among dispute types suggests that these findings may be biased, and a stronger connection between homeland threat and domestic centralization can be found. For example, we know that democracies do sometimes have territorial disputes; this classification scheme now allows testing of the actual nature of those disputes and the level of threat to the states involved.

Secondly, I have specified the types of agreements that are likely to resolve the different classes of territorial disputes. Distributional issue disputes necessitate agreement on the issues of contention. This is much different, and much more difficult to resolve, than the coordination-based agreements that are most likely necessary for many of the border disputes that follow border violations and private fishing ventures. As importantly, these analyses suggest that settled borders can be established even though states continue to have militarized incidents across their borders.

I have demonstrated that there is ample variation across disputes, even within disputes that are all labeled as territorial in nature. This is important because it hints at many different paths to escalation that are not necessarily common, even among disputes of the same general class. Predatory disputes will escalate differently than disputes over disputed territories, and the prevention of low-level conflict will often assume a different character than efforts to eliminate more serious conflicts. My findings suggest that disputed territories, especially differential claims over bordering territories, are among the dispute cases most likely to have fatalities and escalate to war. The mechanism suggested by this research rests on distributional uncertainty and efforts by leaders to press their claims.

⁸Since the models are non-linear, I confirmed the substantive effect with predicted probabilities from each model.

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Appendix—Codebook

The following coding scheme was used to define the issues for each participant in a (CoW-labeled) territorial dispute, which is defined as any dispute in which at least one participant had a revision type of “1–Territory”. I provide a definition of the general classification and then subdivide according to placement of territory or subcategory of issue.

- **Disputed ownership:** These are cases in which the conflict took place on territory for which each state had at least a partial historical claim to ownership.
 - **Border area:** These territories are cohesive units of land and are almost always named (e.g., the Chaco, Kashmir, etc).
 - **Island:** Again, these are cohesive units with names. Sets of islands or islands in specific seas (e.g., the Aegean) are considered maritime areas.
 - **Colony:** The territory is a colonial unit of the state involved in the dispute.
 - **Maritime area:** These territories are cohesive units of water, often named, that may include islands.
 - **Other:** These territories are cohesive units that are not described well by the first four categories. Turkey’s claim to part of Cyprus is an example.
- **General border issues:** These are cases in which the conflict took place across the border of the homeland, but the claims involved did not target a cohesive unit of land.
 - **Delimitation:** These are border conflicts in which the state is aggressively demarcating its claim to the border through some action.
 - **Border tensions:** These cases involve multiple actions—seizures, border violations, fortifications, buildups, etc—that do not constitute acts of demarcation.
- **Opportunity-based territorial conflict:** These are cases in which a prior claim was not necessarily present, but the state targeted territories because of unique contemporary political conditions.
 - **Revanchism:** These are cases in which a state lost territory previously, and changes in dyadic capabilities provide an opportunity to reclaim the lost land.
 - **Weak state:** These are cases in which a state takes advantage of another state in distress—political upheaval, civil war, or involvement in other conflicts—to take its territory.
 - **Predatory/state-making:** These are cases in which strong states take advantage of weaker states to augment their homeland territories through occupation and integration.
 - **General conflict:** These are cases in which conflicts elsewhere create opportunities to gain territory, either because norms of conflict are broken or major states are preoccupied with other crises.
- **State system changes:** These are cases in which the prior status quo territorial distribution was upset by some significant historical event.
 - **New state:** These are cases in which a new state was created or formed.

- **New regime:** These cases in which revolutionary changes in one state called into question the historical status quo.
- **Disintegrating state/empire:** These are cases in which the prior status quo was protected by a strong state or empire; its decline increases uncertainty for territorial distributions among bordering states and states in the region.
- **Border violations:** These are disputes in which a significant majority of incidents (80% or more) are border violations. The violations are coded as Land, Maritime, or Air, based on whichever type was most numerous in the dispute.
- **Other territory-related issues:** These are specific-issue cases, distinct from the other categories.
 - **Fishing rights:** These are cases in which private or state-sponsored fishing fleets and their actions are the primary source of contention.
 - **Rebels/insurgents:** These are cases in which one state's military crossed the border to pursue rebels; the responding state must be involved in some militarized incident for the issue not to be a protest-only case.