



Managing territorial conflict: An introduction to this special issue

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Introduction

Recent conflict over Crimea and Eastern Ukraine illustrates well the importance of contentious issues in world politics, mainly territorial conflict. Leaders in Kiev and Moscow clearly recognize both the tangible and intangible value of the land and maritime spaces disputed. Sevastopol, for example, hosts the Russian Black Sea fleet, vitally important for Russian power projection. Russians also constitute the largest block of Ukrainian citizens residing in the Crimea (60%), spurring demands by Russian nationalists for a return of the strategic peninsula ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea, its support for Ukrainian separatists as well as the build-up of Russian forces along the border, and Putin's threats to curtail natural gas exports to Ukraine and Europe, all demonstrate aggressive, confrontational behavior that often accompanies disputes over territory.

Extant research clearly shows the danger of territorial contention. Most wars involve questions of territory (Vasquez and Henehan, 2001). Territorial disputes are more likely to escalate to war than disputes over regime and policy issues (Senese and Vasquez, 2003). In addition, territorial conflicts show higher numbers of fatalities (Senese, 1996) and persist longer than non-territorial conflicts (Hensel, 1999). Territorial issues also present challenges to conflict resolution, especially when territory is accompanied by strategic rivalry (Lektzian et al., 2010). Still, if leaders succeed in settling borders, the conflict-reducing effects can be dramatic. Successful boundary agreements and resolved disputes help alleviate hostility and

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increase bilateral trade, which reduces the likelihood of violent conflict (Gibler and Tir, 2010; Owsiak, 2012; Simmons, 2005). It appears, then, that territorial disagreements not only represent a critical underlying cause of dyadic contention in international politics, but also denote an important framework for understanding leader decision-making.

The articles in this special issue were originally presented during a conference held at the University of Tennessee—Knoxville. The purpose of the conference was to build on recent advances in the study of violent interstate conflict. In particular, scholars were asked to consider how the context and characteristics of territory influence peace and conflict resolution. While the articles included in this issue come at these questions in different theoretical and empirical ways, each offers novel ideas for how territorial disputes shape interstate interactions. Indeed, evidence presented in this issue demonstrates that factors commonly believed to drive countries toward or away from armed conflict only do so in the presence of territorial disagreements. We also see the critical importance of border delimitation. Even the most conflictual states in the international system can move toward more peaceful relations when leaders agree to well-defined boundaries. Finally, not all territorial claims equally produce threat and conflict. Identifying the location and characteristics of territorial disputes appears to provide leverage in understanding and anticipating the actions leaders take to resolve such claims.

Contents of the special issue

The issue begins with a review of the Issue Correlates of War data project, which serves as a primary source of information on territorial contention in international politics. Paul Hensel and Sara Mitchell (2016) describe the origins of the research program and evaluate some of its primary findings. Hensel and Mitchell make it clear that research on contentious issues has been vital to the study of interstate interactions. Not only has the ICOW data project transformed scholarly inquiry into the underlying drivers of violent conflict, but it has also opened up new lines of investigation into the peaceful settlement of salient disputes. Hensel and Mitchell note that the next step in the project is to identify and appraise identity claims among states. This extension of ICOW, which records concerns governments have for the treatment of ethnic kin elsewhere, will enable systematic research into the origins of irredentist disputes and consequently will help bridge the gap between interstate conflict and civil war.

While research clearly demonstrates that territorial disputes increase the hazard of armed interstate conflict, more recent scholarly efforts have focused on the dyadic environment created by territorial contention. Sam Ghatak, Aaron Gold, and Brandon Prins explore this environment in their study of the democratic peace. They argue that context conditions leader decision-making. When countries face salient external security threats, such as the presence of disputed boundaries or the existence of strategic rivalry, even democratic leaders will find it increasingly difficult to resolve quarrels non-violently. Their evidence shows the pacific effects of dyadic democracy to be mainly limited to environments characterized by both the absence of territorial claims and strategic rivalry. When threat exists, democracy does not clearly lower the likelihood of armed conflict. Their work offers additional empirical support for the territorial peace theory and suggests that removing threat rather than replacing institutions will have a greater impact on eliminating armed conflict.

Sam Bell (2016) tackles a similar problem in his innovative work on the relationship between power and military conflict. Territory once again serves as a conditioning environment for the use of force. If extant research generally demonstrates power balances to correlate with armed conflict, Bell argues and observes a more nuanced relationship. In the presence of territorial disagreements, the likelihood of a militarized clash increases when a powerful challenging state confronts a weaker adversary in control of the disputed territory. His evidence supports the theoretical argument put forward by Powell (1999) that conflict resolution becomes more difficult when the dyadic distribution of power does not match well the dyadic distribution of benefits. Bell's work also shows that certain types of territorial conflicts are more dangerous than others. Consequently, conflict resolution endeavors must consider both the distribution of territorial benefits and the balance of power to ensure settlements will endure.

If research by Ghatak et al. and Bell shows that the presence of a territorial claim enhances threat and subsequently increases the likelihood of armed conflict, Andy Owsiak, Paul Diehl, and Gary Goertz (Diehl et al., 2016) explore the effects of removing such issues from dyadic relationships. They do so using a new framework that classifies interstate relationships along a full continuum from highly hostile and individualistic to highly friendly and integrated (Goertz et al., 2016). They argue that unsettled borders create an environment characterized by power centralization, militarization, and aggressive foreign policy. But removing salient external threats by settling boundary questions does not simply reduce the probability of conflict onset (although it does do this). Settling borders also helps countries transition away from rivalry as well as impeding the development of rivalry in the first place. Similar to Ghatak et al. (2016), Owsiak, Diehl, and Goertz conclude that facilitating the settlement of borders will have stronger and longer-lasting effects on conflict resolution and the consolidation of peace than democratization.

Finally, Doug Gibler (2016) submits that not all territorial disagreements are created equal. Certain kinds of territorial issues are likely to be perceived as more critical and potentially more dangerous than others. He identifies the specific territorial issues fought over in militarized disputes, such as disputed ownership of land, border violations, and delimitation of national boundaries. Gibler observes that contested control over cohesive geographical areas is both common and dangerous, especially when the territory in dispute is contiguous to the homeland. Indeed, over 23% of fatal MID's and 60% of wars concern ownership of disputed border areas. Where borderlines are drawn also can be precarious. Many fights involve attempts to define and reify lines in advantageous ways. He finds that disputed ownership and state system changes, both of which are characterized by distributional uncertainty, are the issues most likely to be fatal and escalate to an interstate war. Gibler speculates that conflict resolution efforts must take note of dispute type if they hope to be successful.

Future research

The territorial research program continues to expand. If scholars initially noted issues associated with armed conflict, inquiry now includes most puzzles addressed by conflict researchers. It's not just that territory serves as a critical explanatory factor in dyadic models of conflict onset. Extant research explores the shape, type, and salience of territorial disagreements and the impact these factors have on the ability of state leaders to manage their

disputes. Further, scholars explore the conditioning influence of disputed territory. Boundary and property fights certainly increase the hazard of violent interstate clashes, but disputed claims also affect leader threat perception, which can alter the causal role played by factors, such as power, regime type, and trade. Indeed, conditions generally expected to facilitate cooperative behavior and conflict resolution may be unable to overcome the fear, distrust, and threat generated by territorial contention. Perhaps this also explains why territorial quarrels frequently prime states for strategic rivalry and authoritarianism.

The articles in the special issue focus heavily on territory as context for interstate conflict. Territorial threat conditions how leaders perceive the dyadic bargaining environment, pushing political elites away from accommodative policies toward more aggressive, escalatory actions. But the articles in this special issue also make clear that the larger territory research program continues to be dynamic and innovative. Three of the papers present original data on territorial contention, enabling various new questions and puzzles to be systematically addressed from the type and scope of specific issues to the strategies states choose to manage them. We suspect (and hope) that this means that the territorial sources of conflict and conflict resolution will continue to motivate scholarly inquiry, not only the study of interstate conflict, but also the growing research on civil wars, ethnic conflict, and separatism.

Authors' note

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