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# Contentious Issues as Opportunities for Diversionary Behavior<sup>1</sup>

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Scholars have long been fascinated by the potential for leaders to engage in diversionary behavior, where leaders use militarized force abroad to distract their publics from various forms of domestic economic and political turmoil. While there is some evidence that diversionary behavior depends on contextual factors such as regime type, opportunities to use force, and interstate rivalry, we do not know whether and how diversionary strategies are used by states to resolve contentious issues. In fact, most diversionary studies compare the initiation of militarized disputes or crises to non-initiation cases, without considering the slew of interstate interactions in between these extremes, where states have an ongoing contested issue that gets managed with both peaceful and militarized conflict management tools. In this article, we extend theories of diversionary behavior to the context of issue claims, including competing claims to territory, maritime areas, and cross-border rivers as coded by the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project. Thinking about an ongoing issue claim as a potential diversionary opportunity, we examine the empirical effect of domestic turmoil on the militarization of issue claims. We consider whether issue diversionary behavior is conditioned by the salience level of the issue, previous wars over the issue in question, and whether the disputing states are involved in a broader rivalry. In a broad sample of directed dyad-years, we find that states are more likely to initiate militarized disputes if they are involved in contentious issues claims. We also find that states involved in issue claims are more likely to initiate a militarized dispute if they have high levels of inflation and if they are contesting over highly salient and previously militarized issues.

**KEYWORDS:** diversionary conflict; inflation; issues; maritime; militarized conflict; river; salience; territory

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Scholars and pundits have long been fascinated by the potential for leaders to engage in diversionary behavior, where leaders use militarized force abroad to distract their publics from various forms of domestic economic and political turmoil (Levy, 1989). One can point to several historical examples of diversion, such as Britain's conflict with Argentina over the Falklands/Malvinas Islands in 1982 in the midst of an Argentine economic crisis (Levy and Vakili, 1992). Large-N quantitative evidence for diversionary behavior by major powers is quite robust as well, with uses of force being more likely as inflation and unemployment rates rise (Ostrom and Job, 1986; Morgan and Bickers, 1992; DeRouen, 1995; Fordham, 1998, 2002; Morgan and Anderson, 1999). However, tests of diversionary hypotheses in broader analyses produce more mixed results (Leeds and Davis, 1997; Miller, 1999; Enterline and Gleditsch, 2000; Trumbore, 2003; Mitchell and Prins, 2004; Gleditsch et al., 2008; Tir and Jasinski, 2008). One way to reconcile this puzzle is to recognize that not all states have equal opportunities for diversionary behavior. Variance in states' opportunities for the diversionary use of force depends on strategic interests or situations (Meernik, 1994, 2000; Meernik and Waterman, 1996), regime type (Smith, 1996; Leeds and Davis, 1997; Miller, 1999), rivalries (Mitchell and Moore, 2002; Mitchell and Prins, 2004), and capabilities (Foster, 2006). This contextual approach meshes well with the tendency in conflict studies to identify pairs of states for analysis that have opportunities to use force, such as politically relevant dyads, rivalries, and major powers.

Empirically, many diversionary studies compare the initiation of militarized disputes or crises to non-initiation cases, without considering the slew of interstate interactions in between these extremes. Consider tests of diversionary hypotheses in dyadic datasets (Leeds and Davis, 1997; Mitchell and Prins, 2004). Among the set of zeros in these datasets, there are cases where states have some issue(s) in contention that could lead to escalation, such as a territorial dispute, while others include pairs of states with few interactions. One faces similar problems when employing monadic datasets (e.g. Ostrom and Job, 1986), although the empirical emphasis on major powers makes it likely that some opportunity for force is always present (Foster, 2006). Even so, there is still variance with respect to the degree to which major powers have opportunities to employ their militaries for strategic purposes because some situations are viewed as much more salient than others. One finds similar design issues in studies of deterrence, where situations of immediate deterrence are easier to analyze because they involve observable crisis situations. General deterrence, in contrast, includes situations where states have opportunities to use force, but are deterred from doing so, as well as situations where states have no desire to initiate conflict against other states (Huth and Russett, 1984, 1993). This thorny research design issue has produced a plethora of research seeking to identify situations where states have opportunities for militarized interaction.

We argue that contentious issue claims provide states with opportunities for diversionary behavior. We test existing theories of diversionary behavior in the context of issue claims, focusing empirically on competing claims to territory,

maritime areas, and cross-border rivers as coded by the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project (Hensel et al., 2008). Thinking about an ongoing issue claim as a potential diversionsary opportunity, we also consider whether other contextual factors are important for understanding when states with opportunities for diversionsary conflict initiate new militarized disputes. Among states with ongoing issue claims, we examine the effect of domestic turmoil on the militarization of issue claims. We also consider whether issue diversionsary behavior is conditioned by the salience level of the issue, previous wars over the issue in question, and whether the disputing states are involved in an issue-specific rivalry. In a broad sample of directed dyad-years, we find that states are more likely to initiate militarized disputes if they are involved in contentious issues claims. This supports our basic argument that issue claims provide states with opportunities to initiate militarized disputes. We then focus exclusively on pairs of states with at least one ongoing contentious issue at stake, finding that states involved in issue claims are more likely to initiate a militarized dispute if they have high levels of inflation and if they are contesting over highly salient and previously militarized issues. These latter findings suggest that states need both opportunity and willingness to engage in militarized action (Most and Starr, 1989).

The following pages begin by providing an overview of the various ways opportunities for force have been identified in the international relations literature. This is followed by our theoretical argument, which links issue claims, domestic turmoil, and contextual factors to the initiation of militarized disputes. We then describe the data used to evaluate our hypotheses and present our empirical results. We conclude with a discussion of the importance of our findings, emphasizing that contentious issues offer an alternative way for conceptualizing states' opportunities for conflicts. Furthermore, domestic turmoil influences the timing of coercive strategies for managing contentious interstate issues, which enriches current explanations for foreign policy behavior in the context of issue claims.

### **Identifying States' Opportunities to Use Militarized Force**

Several interesting trends emerge when we consider empirical patterns of interstate conflict. First, a large number of countries never become involved in any wars. From 1816 to 1965, 77 of the total 144 states (53%) fought in no wars (Vasquez and Henehan, 1999: 394). This pattern holds even for dyads with contiguous or major power members, as 57% of politically relevant dyads from 1816 to 1992 did not experience warfare (Maoz, 2004: 110). Second, a small number of dyads account for the lion's share of militarized interaction. While constituting only 5% of all dyads with one or more militarized disputes, pairs of states that are characterized as enduring rivals account for 40% of all militarized disputes and 50% of all wars as coded by the Correlates of War (COW) Project (Stinnett and Diehl, 2001: 718).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Enduring rivals are defined as pairs of states with six or more disputes over a period of 20 or more years (Diehl and Goertz, 2000).

These empirical patterns suggest that there is considerable variation in the extent to which states have opportunities for interstate conflict and in the extent to which they are willing to employ militarized options to pursue foreign policy goals. This interesting empirical variation is often described in terms of a state's opportunity and willingness for interstate conflict (Most and Starr, 1989).

Several factors that have been identified to help explain the variance in states' opportunities for interstate conflict, including political relevance, contiguity, territorial disputes, capabilities, military alliances, strategic interests, and rivalries. These forces for conflict tend to be aggregated to the level of the state, region, or interstate system. Meanwhile, the diversionary literature focuses on domestic conditions for conflict opportunities, including regime type/institutional characteristics, domestic turmoil, and poor economic conditions. Our theoretical approach integrates these two ways of conceptualizing opportunities for conflict.

### ***Political Relevance***

Bremer's (1992) path-breaking study of dangerous dyads helped to identify factors that make war more likely between pairs of states. His work showed that states with shared borders were much more likely to fight each other (*inter alia*). Maoz and Russett (1992, 1993) built upon Bremer's framework by focusing empirical analysis on states with high opportunities for conflict, which included pairs of states that bordered each other or contained one or more major powers. This definition of conflict opportunity became widely accepted in the conflict community, as dozens of studies have analyzed politically relevant dyads.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning with contiguity, several studies have shown that states sharing borders have much higher chances for militarized conflict (Starr and Most, 1976, 1978; Most and Starr, 1989; Siverson and Starr, 1990, 1991; Bremer, 1992).<sup>4</sup> This approach is supported by much of the issue-based literature, which has focused on specific territorial claims as an important form of opportunity for conflict, with most land borders being contested at some point in time, and with territorial issues being among the most violent interstate issues (Huth, 1996; Hensel, 2001; Huth and Allee, 2002; Senese and Vasquez, 2003; Senese, 2005; Hensel et al., 2008). Shared rivers between two states also significantly increase the chances for militarized disputes, especially if the river forms the boundary between two states (Toset et al., 2000; Gleditsch et al., 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> Several studies have moved beyond contiguity and capabilities to better capture states' opportunities to use violence. For instance, Maoz (1996) examines states' politically relevant international environments (PRIE), which substitutes regions for direct land contiguity, while Quackenbush (2006) adds military alliances to political relevance to conceptualize politically active dyads. Each of these approaches is based on the idea that we should analyze conflict propensity in a set of cases with reasonable opportunities for conflict.

<sup>4</sup> The mechanism relating contiguity to conflict is less clear as it could reflect increased interaction opportunities, reduced loss of military strength with distance (Boulding, 1963; Lemke, 1995), or escalation over specific territorial disputes (Vasquez, 1995).

The other half of the definition of political relevance emphasizes states' military, economic, and demographic capabilities. Major powers have more opportunities for conflict because their enhanced capabilities extend their military reach, and because their strategic interests are global in nature. The propensity for major powers to fight has found strong empirical support in general (Clark and Regan, 2003) and within the diversionary literature, which focuses largely on force initiation by the United States and Great Britain (Ostrom and Job, 1986; Morgan and Bickers, 1992; DeRouen, 1995; Fordham, 1998, 2002; Morgan and Anderson, 1999).

### ***Strategic Interests***

The diversionary literature moves beyond capabilities and contiguity by emphasizing states' strategic interests as another avenue for thinking about opportunities to use force. Blechman and Kaplan (1978) collected data on political uses of force by the United States in the Cold War era, which formed the basis for Ostrom and Job's (1986) path-breaking study on diversion. Meernik (1994, 2000) moved beyond the actual use of force by adding US opportunities to use force based on news accounts of crisis situations. Work following in this tradition has emphasized that states' opportunities for diversionary uses of force depend on the existence of perceived threats (James and Oneal, 1991; James and Hristoulas, 1994), the severity of crises (Snyder, 1994; Kinsella and Russett, 2002; DeRouen, 2000), and the distinction between low and high politics issues (Jentleson, 1992; Kisangani and Pickering, 2007).

Another common approach for thinking about states' opportunities to employ military force emphasizes states' interstate environments. Scholars have argued that states involved in interstate rivalries are much more likely to employ force to pursue foreign policy goals (Vasquez, 1993; Goertz, 1994; Hensel, 1998; Thompson, 1999; Schroeder, 1999). Of course, one can claim that the rivalry–conflict relationship borders on tautology, especially if the dispute density definition of rivalry is employed (Goertz and Diehl, 1992; Diehl and Goertz, 2000). Yet, several studies have shown clearly that the probability of dispute onset and escalation changes across the course of a rivalry (Leng, 1983; Brecher and James, 1988; Brecher, 1993; Hensel, 1994; Diehl and Goertz, 2000; Colaresi and Thompson, 2002).

Diversionary scholars have applied the logic of rivalry to help explain states' variance in opportunities for diversionary uses of force (Mitchell and Moore, 2002; Mitchell and Prins, 2004; Foster, 2006). Mitchell and Moore (2002) find that US uses of force in the Cold War were characterized by autoregressive properties, which makes sense given that the US operated in a strategic situation with the Soviet Union as its primary rival. Mitchell and Prins (2004) find that high levels of inflation make states more likely to initiate MID's against rival states, while Foster (2006) shows that a rivalry is an important opportunity context, especially for minor powers considering force for diversionary purposes.

### ***Domestic Conditions***

Diversionary scholars have also contributed to the broader literature on opportunities for force by emphasizing the importance of domestic political and economic factors. High levels of inflation and unemployment increase the chances for political uses of

force (Ostrom and Job, 1986; Bennett and Nordstrom, 2000; Fordham, 2002). Similarly, domestic turmoil in the form of ethnic violence, riots, protests, and coup risk promotes the use of force by state leaders (Enterline and Gleditsch, 2000; Trumbore, 2003; Sobek, 2007; Tir and Jasinski, 2008; Gleditsch et al., 2008). Leaders are also attuned to their electoral fortunes when employing the military, taking into consideration election calendars (Blainey, 1973; Ward and Widmaier, 1982; Stoll, 1984; Richards et al., 1993; Downs and Rocke, 1995; Chiozza and Goemans, 2004), their popularity levels (Ostrom and Job, 1986; Morgan and Bickers, 1992; DeRouen, 2000; Foster and Palmer, 2006; Davies, 2007; Brulé, 2008), and legislative opposition (Prins, 2001; Foster, 2008). These studies make it clear that domestic conditions create temporal variance in states' opportunities to use force abroad.

Finally, diversionary scholars have also pointed to important differences in diversionary behavior based on domestic institutions. Democratic leaders may have strong incentives to employ diversionary force, especially if the public will rally around the leader in times of crises (Mueller, 1973). However, if other states are paying attention to domestic conditions inside democratic states, they may be less willing to make strong demands or escalate issues when facing democratic adversaries. This is the logic of strategic conflict avoidance, whereby democracies might have the strongest motives for diversion, but the fewest opportunities (Morgan and Schwebach, 1992; Smith, 1996; Leeds and Davis, 1997; Miller, 1999; Heldt, 1999; Mitchell and Prins, 2004; Pickering and Kisangani, 2005; Fordham, 2005; DeRouen and Sprecher, 2006; Gent, 2009). Leeds and Davis (1997) find empirical support for this claim, showing that democracies are less likely to be targets of MID initiation in bad economic times. Mitchell and Prins (2004) similarly find that economic conditions have the weakest effect on initiations of force by democratic states. In contrast, autocracies are much more likely to initiate force against their rivals when inflation is high.<sup>5</sup> In short, it is important to consider domestic institutional characteristics when thinking about opportunities for states to engage in interstate violence.

## **Theoretical Argument**

Conflict scholars have been very creative in developing strategies to model the variance in states' opportunities for interstate conflict. We advance a different strategy, one that builds upon the issue-based approach to world politics (Diehl, 1992; Hensel, 2001; Hensel et al., 2008; Mansbach and Vasquez, 1981; O'Leary, 1976; Potter, 1980; Vasquez, 1993). This perspective focuses on the specific issues that states contend over, such as border disputes, control of freshwater or oceanic resources, regime survival, treatment of ethnic groups or individuals, and trade restrictions. Policy makers want to select the best strategies to achieve optimal outcomes over contentious issues, ranging from peaceful tactics, such as bilateral negotiations and third party mediation, to militarized tactics, including the use of force. Recent data

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<sup>5</sup> Oneal and Tir (2006) find stronger evidence linking force initiation and economic misery for democracies, but they show that these are driven largely by the democratic major powers and that these effects are relatively small substantively.

collection projects have advanced the issue-based perspective by providing rich information about territorial, maritime, and cross-border river claims (Huth, 1996; Huth and Allee, 2002; Hensel, 2001; Hensel et al., 2006; Hensel et al., 2008). These data projects compile information about the importance of the claimed issue to each claimant and attempts by the parties involved to settle the issue with peaceful and militarized tools.

As noted earlier, several strategies have been employed to narrow down the set of dyads with genuine opportunities for conflicts. Even when examining politically relevant dyads, however, there is still considerable variation in the set of no conflict cases (zeros). Issue claims provide a way of further narrowing down the set of dyads that have opportunities for conflict. By focusing on cases where one state makes a verbal claim to something owned or administered by another state, such as a piece of territory, we can identify ongoing situations where the use of force is always an option. Issue claim datasets also provide important information about the salience of the claimed issue to each side, which helps to further delineate opportunities for force among the set of dyads with active issue claims. Issue claims can also generate variance in terms of the number of possible issues over which states may initiate the use of force. Some pairs of states have several ongoing issue claims simultaneously, while other dyads have no or few issues in contention. Issue claims are not limited to major powers or contiguous states either, which helps to expand conflict opportunities beyond the politically relevant group.<sup>6</sup> The issue-based approach is similar to strategies that have employed rival dyads to test various conflict theories, such as arms races and deterrence (Gibler et al., 2005; Huth and Russett, 1993), but it provides much richer variation on the militarized side of the spectrum because less than half of all issue claims ever become militarized (Hensel et al., 2008).

Our first general expectation is that contentious issues provide opportunities for conflict. States that are actively challenging other states on specific issues, such as pre-existing borders or access to resources in maritime spaces, can always turn to militarized options for resolving those issues. Clearly states choose peaceful tactics as often as militarized ones in these scenarios, but the very existence of a contentious issue places a dyad in a richer opportunity set for conflict in comparison to a dyad with no active issues at stake. This basic idea has been supported empirically in studies that focus on territory, as the existence of a territorial claim in a dyad significantly increases the onset and escalation of militarized disputes (Senese and Vasquez, 2003). This leads to our first hypothesis:

*H1: States involved in contentious issue claims are more likely to initiate militarized disputes than states not involved in issue claims.*

While examining the presence of an ongoing issue claim should help us better understand diversionsary behavior, we can account for a greater share in the variance in the use of force among issue-contending dyads by considering several contextual factors that will make the use of militarized strategies more likely. We situate these

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<sup>6</sup> This is important because around 15% of all militarized disputes occur in non-politically relevant dyads (Maoz and Russett, 1993).



factors in a diversionary approach to understanding the use of force, which helps to expand earlier analyses of issue claims, and sheds new light on situations where states have opportunities for diversionary force. As we show below, this marriage of the issue-based perspective and diversionary theory of war is quite fruitful.

The basic idea of the diversionary theory of war is that states are more likely to initiate a militarized dispute or crisis when they are facing domestic turmoil, such as high levels of inflation or unemployment, or domestic unrest, such as protests and riots. In these situations, leaders try to rally the public behind the government by focusing their attention on external enemies. As Mitchell and Prins (2004) show, if states have natural enemies to target (or rivals), they are more likely to initiate militarized disputes when inflation levels are high. We have a similar expectation in the context of issue claims. When facing situations of domestic turmoil, leaders should be more likely to initiate diversionary uses of force against the states with which they have ongoing issue disputes. The Falklands War of 1982, for example, came about between two states that were involved in an ongoing territorial claim, and when one side (Argentina) was facing a bad domestic economic situation. We see similar behavior in other issue claim areas as well. Turkey initiated multiple uses of force against Iraq in 2000 and 2001 over shared water rights on the Tigris River at a time when Turkey's inflation rate was over 30%. Turkey also used force against Greece twice in the same two-year period (2000–2001) to pursue its maritime claims in the Aegean Sea. Issue claims provide opportunities for conflicts, while domestic turmoil provides greater willingness to employ force at a particular point in time. This leads to our general diversionary hypothesis:

*H2: For states involved in contentious issue claims, domestic turmoil makes the initiation of a militarized dispute more likely.*

We can go one step farther, though, because the issue-based approach provides very rich information about the characteristics of issue claims, such as the salience or importance of the claimed issue to the claimant states and the history of peaceful and militarized interaction over the contested issue. We believe these issue-specific contextual factors give us greater purchase for predicting the variance in diversionary uses of force. We focus on three factors: issue claim salience, prior militarization, and issue-specific rivalry.

### ***Issue Claim Salience***

One of the key contributions of the issue-based approach to world politics is a recognition that states' strategies for managing contentious issues depend on the importance or *salience* of the issue(s) at stake. As Hensel et al. (2008: 120) note, most scholars in this tradition focus on tangible aspects of issue salience, such as security, survival, and wealth, and intangible dimensions of issue salience, such as culture, equality, independence, and prestige. Territorial issues are quite escalatory because they typically have high tangible and intangible salience to claimant states. On the tangible side, land often contains important resources, such as oil and minerals, and some land has strategic value as well (e.g. mountains for defense). On the intangible side, territory is often linked to sacred religious sites and has important historical significance (e.g. Kosovo). Hensel et al. (2008) find that militarized disputes are

more likely to occur in the issue context when the disputed issue is more salient. This is observed both across issues (territorial claims experience more militarized disputes than maritime or river claims) and within issues (territorial claims with higher values of salience have more militarized disputes than territorial claims with lower values of salience). Huth and Allee (2002: 236) report similar findings, whereby territorial claims with high strategic value are twice as likely to escalate to higher levels of militarization in comparison to claims with less strategic importance.

We expect similar patterns to hold in the context of diversionsary uses of force. Issue claims provide ongoing opportunities for diversion, and yet not all issues are created equal. It is easier for leaders to employ force if the issues at stake are highly salient because the public will be much more aware of these issues and will therefore be easier to rally in situations of domestic turmoil. For example, many US–Canadian maritime claims, such as contention over the Northwest Passage or Machias Seal Island, are not terribly salient to either side, which would make the use of force harder to justify to each side’s domestic audience. In contrast, fishing issues between Canada, Spain, and Portugal in the Northwest Atlantic fisheries were extremely salient to all parties involved, resulting in Canada’s militarized seizure of the fishing vessel *Estai* in March 1995. Spain responded by sending naval vessels to the Grand Banks area of Newfoundland to protect Spanish trawlers. This dispute arose in the context of an ongoing maritime claim that involved Canada’s right to arrest any Spanish or Portuguese vessels in the disputed area, and also occurred in a period of time when Canada’s domestic inflation rate was rising sharply.<sup>7</sup> We see a similar pattern with river claims, with the most serious militarized clashes over rivers occurring in regions like the Middle East where fresh water resources are extremely scarce. Typical river claims in the Middle East region have higher salience values than river claims in other regions, such as the Western Hemisphere and Western Europe (Hensel et al., 2006). In short, much as enduring rivalry situations offer more opportunities for diversion, highly salient issues create more diversionsary opportunities as well.

*H3: The positive impact of domestic turmoil on militarized dispute initiation in contentious issue claims should increase as the salience of the issues increases.*

### ***Prior Militarization***

The crisis bargaining and interstate rivalry literatures highlight the interdependencies between crises and disputes over time. Leng’s (1983) study of crisis bargaining showed that repeated crises typically ended up in war, especially by the third crisis. Hensel (1994) reported similar findings in Latin American militarized disputes, showing that recurrent crises were much more likely if prior crises ended in stalemates. Colaresi and Thompson (2002) examined the relationships between crises in the ICB dataset and found strong evidence for crisis recurrence, whereby a higher number of prior crises increases the chances for future crises (all crises and violent crises). Even more interesting is that they showed increasing probabilities for crisis recurrence as

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bankofcanada.ca/en/cpi.html>.

the number of past crises increases. In the set of dyads that have experienced one or more crises, having three or more prior crises makes the onset of another crisis 80 times more likely (Colaresi and Thompson, 2002: 1191). Diehl and Goertz (2000) observe similar patterns in their study of interstate rivalries, whereby conflict tends to beget more conflict over time.

We have a similar expectation regarding past conflict experience in the context of issue claims. Hensel et al. (2008) find that militarized conflict is much more likely in an issue claim dyad-year if states have a history of recent militarized disputes. What we add here is a diversionary twist to this argument, whereby past conflict and domestic turmoil create joint conditions for diversionary uses of force. In other words, states should be more likely to pursue militarized options to contest a given issue if they are experiencing domestic turmoil (e.g. high inflation) *and* if they have experienced a recent conflict over the issue at hand. Prior wars might be particularly dangerous, especially if one side loses or the war ends in stalemate (Leng, 1983).

*H4: The positive impact of domestic turmoil on militarized dispute initiation in contentious issue claims increases for claimants who have fought a recent war over the issue.*

### ***Issue-Specific Rivalry***

Rival states have been shown to take advantage of diversionary opportunities more often than non-rival states (Mitchell and Prins, 2004). We consider whether a similar pattern holds in contentious issue claims. They are distinct, however, because empirical definitions of rivalry based on dispute density or strategic rivalry could arise from a variety of issue conflict situations. Some rivals are characterized by a single issue (e.g. territorial and maritime conflict over the Falklands for UK–Argentina), while other dyads have a variety of different issues that characterize their rivalry (e.g. Israel–Syria). We also observe a significant amount of variation in the extent to which contentious issues are militarized, which implies that there will also be variance in the degree to which issue rivals are also enduring or strategic rivals. We expand the traditional definition of rivalry using an issue-based perspective. The ICOW dataset, which we employ in our analyses below, reports only militarized disputes over the specific issues in contention. For example, militarized disputes over rivers are not translated into other contentious issues, such as territory, if the crisis focuses only on the former issue. We employ the dispute density approach to identify rival dyads in this more limited conflict domain. We then test whether issue-specific rivalry makes diversionary tactics more likely, much like interstate rivalry in general enhances the probability that a state will initiate a militarized dispute.

*H5: The positive impact of domestic turmoil on militarized dispute initiation in contentious issue claims increases for claimants who are involved in an issue-specific rivalry.*

## **Cases, Variables, and Methods**

At the most general level, our theory predicts that leaders in states with ongoing issue claims will have more opportunities to make diversionary uses of force than

they would if they were not involved in a contentious dispute (H1). We also expect to see diversionsary behavior among the set of countries with ongoing issue claims (H2). However, not all issue claims are equal. The impact of domestic turmoil on dispute militarization is expected to be conditioned on several factors, including issue salience (H3), previous fatal disputes over the issue (H4), and the presence of a rivalry (H5). Our purpose here is to provide empirical tests of these expectations.

### ***Issue Claims as Diversionsary Opportunities***

Tests of these hypotheses require two sets of analyses. The first is a general model including all states that could have made diversionsary uses of force depending on their level of domestic turmoil. We draw heavily on the work on Mitchell and Prins (2004) to build the first dataset.<sup>8</sup> This work is useful because Mitchell and Prins were interested in an analogous research question, considering how rivalries (rather than issue claims) impact diversionsary activity. The unit of analysis is politically-relevant directed dyads from 1960 to 2001. The dependent variable of dispute initiation is coded 1 if a MID participant is on side A and originated the dispute (Jones et al., 1996). Dyads in our analyses are limited by data availability and regional coverage of the ICOW dataset (see below). Our final analysis includes 23,776 dyad-years, of which 182 (0.77%) cases experience MID initiation. We use logistic regression to test the hypotheses with robust standard errors clustered by dyad. All independent variables are lagged one year.

The first hypothesis ignores variations within issue claims by simply predicting that the impact of domestic turmoil on diversionsary behavior will increase when states are involved in an ongoing issue claim. An adequate test of this hypothesis requires an interaction between a measure of domestic turmoil and the presence of an issue claim. For *domestic turmoil*, we follow Mitchell and Prins (2004: 949) in using the percentage change in the World Bank's Consumer Price Index (CPI). This measure has been used by a plethora of scholars as a proxy for domestic turmoil because more direct measures, such as unemployment and inflation, have serious missing data problems when we look beyond the United States (e.g. Ostrom and Job, 1986; James and Oneal, 1991; DeRouen, 1995; Meernik and Waterman, 1996).

The second piece of the interaction term, *ongoing issue claim*, is coded 1 if the dyad had at least one ongoing issue as defined by version 1.1 of the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project's data on contentious issue claims (Hensel, 2001; Mitchell, 2002; Hensel et al., 2008). The ICOW project identifies contentious issue claims based on explicit evidence of contention involving official representatives of two or more states over a particular issue. Three types of contentious issues are in the database: (1) territorial claims, where one state challenges sovereignty over a specific piece of territory that is claimed or administered by another state, (2) maritime claims, which involve explicit contention between two or more states over the ownership, access to, or usage of a maritime area, and (3) river claims, which involve explicit contention over the

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<sup>8</sup> We truncate much of the details in describing the general dataset to provide more space for describing our original dataset. See Mitchell and Prins (2004: 947–950) for a detailed discussion.

usage or ownership of an international river.<sup>9</sup> To date, ICOW has coded territorial claims in the Western Hemisphere and Western Europe (1816–2001), maritime claims in the Western Hemisphere and Europe (1900–2001), and river claims in the Western Hemisphere, Western Europe, and the Middle East (1900–2001) (Hensel et al., 2008).<sup>10</sup>

Several characteristics of the ICOW dataset make it useful for our empirical tests. First, the dataset does not require any specific form of contention or interaction over an issue claim beyond the explicit statement of the claim itself. Over 60% of the 244 issue claims and 96% of claim years never see the threat or use of force by either claimant. This justifies our characterization of issue claims as opportunities to use force, rather than defining our case selection as the actual usage of force. Second, the wide spatial and temporal coverage of the ICOW dataset allows us to expand the discussion of diversionary theory well beyond the US-centered studies that have largely dominated the literature. Third, the ICOW dataset provides the most direct test of our theory possible because it includes a plethora of information on the issue under contention, settlement techniques, and the disputants. We should expect the interaction between CPI and ICOW issues to be positive and significant to support our first hypothesis, which would indicate that ongoing issues indeed provide enhanced opportunities for diversionary behavior.

### ***Issue Diversionary Behavior: Conditional Effects***

While the first dataset will give us a reasonable first-cut test of the conditional impact of ongoing issues on diversionary conflicts, it conceals interesting information within the ICOW dataset by forcing us to condense each claim into a simple dichotomous variable.<sup>11</sup> This allows us to say little about variations in issue salience (H3), previous militarization of issues (H4), and rivalries within issues (H5). To remedy this problem, we construct a second *issue-specific* dataset to focus more closely on the characteristics of the issue and the claimants. The unit of analysis for the original ICOW dataset is the dyad-year for each of the 244 claims (10,041 observations). Our first step was to convert the unit of analysis to directed dyad-year for each claim (20,082 observations), which allows us to capture the characteristics of the

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<sup>9</sup>Examples of the three types of issues include the territorial dispute between the US and Spain over Florida (1916–1821), the river dispute between the US and Mexico over the Lower Rio Grande (1924–1944), and the maritime dispute between the US and Canada over the Northwest Passage (1969–present).

<sup>10</sup>See the ICOW website at [www.icow.org](http://www.icow.org) for updates on coverage by issue and region.

<sup>11</sup>Version 1.1 of the ICOW dataset includes 10,041 potential dyad-year observations, each of which has unique values for salience, within-issue rivalries, and previous militarization of the issue. These unique values were eliminated in the first dataset to arrive at single dyad-year observations (8,222 potential observations). We retrieve this information in the second set of analyses to provide the most accurate tests of our hypotheses possible.

state that could potentially initiate a militarized dispute.<sup>12</sup> As before, the dependent variable, MID initiation, is coded 1 if State A initiated a dispute against State B in each claim-dyad-year. It takes on a positive value in 343 (5.93%) cases. We again use logistic regression to test our hypotheses with standard errors clustered by claim.

Our second hypothesis predicts diversionsary behavior within issue claims, regardless of potential conditional effects. This is tested by including an updated measure of the consumer price index (*CPI*) from the World Bank WDI database.<sup>13</sup> We expect this measure to be positive and significant. The final three hypotheses predict that the impact of *CPI* on dispute militarization should be conditioned on three issue-specific factors. First, leaders are expected to have greater diversionsary opportunities as the importance of the issue under contention increases. A measure of *issue salience* from the ICOW dataset captures a variety of issue attributes, each of which is thought to increase the issue's value to one or both sides. This index combines six dichotomous dimensions, with each dimension contributing up to two points to the salience index, one point per claimant state for which the indicator is present, producing a range from 0 to 12 (Hensel et al., 2008: 130–131).<sup>14</sup> We expect the impact of *CPI* to have an increasingly positive influence on MID initiation as issue salience increases to support the third hypothesis.

Our fourth hypothesis predicts that leaders should have greater opportunities to divert if their country has fought previous hostile disputes over the issue. This expectation is tested by interacting the *CPI* measure with a dummy variable coded 1 if the dyad has fought at least one militarized dispute with fatalities over the issue within the previous five years, and 0 otherwise.<sup>15</sup> We expect a positive and significant value for this interaction, which would indicate that past militarization

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<sup>12</sup> The actual number of observations tested is dramatically smaller than the potential observations within the ICOW dataset because the *CPI* measure is available starting in 1962.

<sup>13</sup> Changes in the World Bank data made it impossible to precisely update the Mitchell and Prins (2004) *CPI* variable. Following their protocol (logged and differenced), our updated *CPI* measure correlates with their measure at  $r = .462$  ( $p < .001$ ). We opt to use the Mitchell and Prins *CPI* measure in the first set of analyses because we are interested in providing the most difficult test possible to show that diversionsary behavior is conditioned on ICOW issues within an established baseline dataset. We opt for the updated *CPI* measure in the second set of analyses to take advantage of the updated ICOW observations.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the maritime dispute between the US and Canada over sovereignty of the Machias Seal Island has a low salience value because neither state relies on sovereignty over the island for fishing or shipping needs. In contrast, Iceland and the UK came to the brink of war over the territorial sea around Iceland because the fishing area was seen as vital to each state's economy. See Hensel et al. (2008) for a thorough explanation of issue salience.

<sup>15</sup> Fatal MIDs are defined by the Correlates of War Militarized Dispute dataset (Jones et al., 1996). We also tested lower-level MIDs, full-scale wars, and intervals of 10 and 15 years. None of these variations made an appreciable difference in our results. One notable coding issue is that MIDs are only coded within the ICOW dataset if they are directly tied to the issue under contention. Excluding MIDs that are not related to ICOW issues is necessary for an adequate test of our hypothesis because ongoing issues should not be thought of as diversionsary opportunities for MIDs that are unrelated to the issue under dispute.

of ICOW issues indeed offers leaders greater opportunities to use diversionary behavior.

Our final hypothesis predicts that leaders in states involved in broader rivalries will be more likely to engage in diversionary behavior. This expectation is tested by creating a new measure of *issue-specific rivalries*. The ICOW dataset draws on the MID dataset by identifying MIDs that are directly related to the contentious issue under question. We utilize Goertz and Diehl's (1993) "conflict density" approach in identifying rivalries as years in which the dyad has experienced three or more MIDs within the preceding ten years of the ongoing issue claim.<sup>16</sup> This yields 191 dyad-years of ongoing issue-specific rivalries. We expect a positive and significant coefficient for the interaction between CPI and ICOW rivalries to support the fifth hypothesis.

### ***Control Variables***

We include several control variables in both sets of analyses. First, *relative power* is a ratio of State A's COW capabilities (CINC) score to the combined capabilities of the dyad (Singer et al., 1972). High values for this measure capture cases where a state has a distinct power advantage, which we expect will make the state more likely to initiate a militarized dispute (Leeds, 2003; Bennett and Stam, 2000). Second, *distance* (logged) is the distance in miles from the capital cities of the dyads. We expect longer distances to decrease the likelihood of militarized disputes because of the higher costs of attacking a distant target. Third, *joint democracy* is a dummy variable coded 1 if each state in the dyad has a Polity IV score greater than five on the democracy minus autocracy index (Marshall and Jaggers, 2000). Based on the voluminous democratic peace literature (e.g. Russett and Oneal, 2001), we expect this measure to have a negative impact on the likelihood of militarized conflict. Fourth, we include a dummy variable for *rivalries* to complete the baseline model from Mitchell and Prins (2004), which helps isolate diversionary behavior enhanced by rivalries from those enhanced by ongoing issue claims. Finally, we control for *temporal dependence* with a measure counting the number of years since the dyad last fought a militarized dispute with natural cubic splines (Beck et al., 1998).<sup>17</sup>

### **Empirical Tests**

We begin with our basic hypothesis (H1), which predicts that ongoing contentious issues will offer opportunities for diversionary uses of force. This is tested in Table 1, Model 1 by including an interaction between domestic turmoil (CPI) and ongoing

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<sup>16</sup> We experimented with variations in this measure by examining less/more MIDs over shorter/longer time periods (e.g. 2+ MIDs over 20 years). None of these variations made an appreciable difference to our results.

<sup>17</sup> To save room, we omit the results for peace years and cubic splines from Table 1.

Table 1. Logistic Regression of Diversionsary Behavior, 1962–2001

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
CPI*Ongoing issue	0.051* (0.028)				
Ongoing issue	1.457*** (0.204)				
CPI*Issue salience			0.008* (0.004)		
Issue salience			0.001 (0.040)		
CPI*Recent war				0.200*** (0.046)	
Recent war				-0.522* (0.281)	
CPI*Rivalry					0.014 (0.019)
Rivalry	1.485*** (0.225)				0.203 (0.285)
CPI	-0.057** (0.022)	0.018* (0.009)	-0.041 (0.032)	0.015 (0.010)	0.018* (0.009)
Relative power	-0.106 (0.211)	-0.092 (0.168)	-0.093 (0.161)	-0.069 (0.164)	-0.081 (0.161)
Distance	-0.192** (0.070)	-0.124* (0.070)	-0.118* (0.069)	-0.124* (0.070)	-0.124* (0.071)
Joint Democracy	-0.893*** (0.203)	-0.401*** (0.125)	-0.413*** (0.116)	-0.425*** (0.120)	-0.416*** (0.117)
Constant	-2.017*** (0.553)	-1.515*** (0.165)	-1.508*** (0.311)	-1.510*** (0.172)	-1.546*** (0.167)
Observations	23776	5780	5780	5780	5780
LL	-827.3	-1157.1	-1154.3	-1153.0	-1156.4
$\chi^2$	481.49***	185.35***	195.68***	283.26***	203.15***

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001 (one-tailed).

Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by issue/dyad. Peace years and splines not shown. “CPI” and “Rivalry” in Model 1 are defined by Mitchell and Prins (2004). The same measures in subsequent models use the updated “CPI” measure and ICOW-specific rivalries

ICOW issue in Mitchell and Prins’s (2004) baseline model.<sup>18</sup> As expected, we find strong support for this hypothesis in Model 1 with a positive coefficient for the interaction term ( $p < .033$ ), which suggests that ongoing issue claims indeed offer greater opportunities for diversionsary behavior. This provides evidence that issues matter for diversionsary behavior, but suggests little about when or for whom they matter.

Our second set of analyses (Models 2–5) help answer these remaining questions by focusing only on states with ongoing issues. Our second hypothesis predicts that

<sup>18</sup> The key difference between our analyses and the Mitchell and Prins (2004) model is that we eliminate regions that have not been coded by ICOW.



domestic turmoil within ongoing issues should increase the likelihood of militarized dispute initiation. This is supported with a positive and significant coefficient for CPI ( $p < .020$ ) in Model 2. Beyond statistical significance, we can gauge the impact of the independent variables by calculating each variable's marginal effect on the dependent variable. The *Clarify* program was used to calculate predicted values for the significant variables in Table 1 (King et al., 2000; Tomz et al., 2003). The results for these calculations are presented in Figure 1. This figure displays how the likelihood of MID initiation varies when each variable is allowed to vary from its 10th to 90th percentile, while holding all other variables constant at their mean or mode. Using this approach, we see that CPI in Model 2 has a moderately strong substantive impact on the likelihood of MID initiation, raising the likelihood by 12.9% (.037 to .042).<sup>19</sup> Thus, we also find strong support for Hypothesis 2.

The final set of analyses estimate whether the impact of domestic turmoil on dispute initiation is conditioned on a variety of factors. Our third hypothesis predicts that leaders will find enhanced diversionary opportunities as the salience of the issue increases. While the coefficients on the interactive terms provide some information, Brambor et al. (2006) suggest that interactive effects between two continuous variables are best analyzed by plotting the marginal effect of primary independent variable versus the conditional variables while holding control variables constant. We follow this advice by presenting the primary findings for the conditional hypothesis in Figure 2 using Boehmke's (2006) *grinter* data utility.

As we can see in Figure 2, the marginal effect of CPI on dispute initiation indeed increases as claim salience increases, which is confirmed with a positive and significant coefficient for the interaction term in Model 3 ( $p < .036$ ). However, this relationship is significant only when the upper and lower bounds of the confidence interval exclude zero. In this case, we see that diversionary opportunities are significantly enhanced when the claim salience index is greater than six. The kernel density plot indicates that most of the observations (around 60%) fall in the significant area. Consistent with our theory, we find strong support for the third hypothesis when issue salience is moderate or high. This shows that states are strategic when making decisions about when to use force to pursue their issue related goals. For contentious issues that are highly salient, such as the Falklands Islands for Argentina and Great Britain, high levels of domestic turmoil offer opportunities for issue escalation, much as we saw in the 1982 Falklands War when Argentina's economy was suffering from inflation.

Another useful way to further probe this relationship is to focus on the constitutive term of interest (CPI), which can be interpreted in Model 3 as the impact of CPI on MID onset when salience levels equal zero (Brambor et al., 2006). We can more easily understand the substantive impact of CPI conditioned on issue salience by dichotomizing the constitutive term for high (above mean) and low (below mean) salience, and then re-running the analyses with the additional

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<sup>19</sup> We should note that while the substantive effects seem small, the rareness of the dependent variable produces small predicted probabilities in general. This is similar to other dyadic analyses of international conflict.

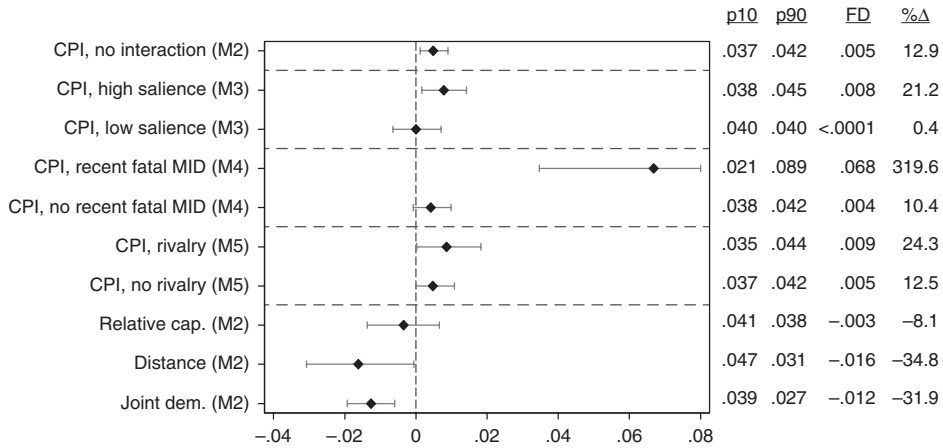


Figure 1. Logistic Regression of Diversionsary Behavior, 1962–2001: Substantive Effects  
 \*Substantive effect for “Joint Democracy” calculated from minimum (0) to maximum (1) value. Upper CI for “CPI, recent fatal MID (M4)” truncated for presentational purposes. Plot generated using Boehmke’s (2008) “plotfids” command in Stata 10.0.

interactive terms.<sup>20</sup> For ease of interpretation, in Figure 1, we show the impact of CPI on the likelihood of dispute initiation based on high and low issue salience. As we can see, the impact of CPI is quite large in highly salient issues, increasing the likelihood of MID initiation by 21.2% (.038 to .045). Consistent with Figure 2, the impact of CPI is very low and insignificant when issue salience is low.

The fourth hypothesis predicts that leaders will find more diversionsary opportunities when the dyad experienced a recent fatal militarized dispute over the issue at stake. We find initial support for this hypothesis with a positive and significant interaction term in Model 4 ( $p < .001$ ). In substantive terms, we see in Figure 1 that an increase in CPI from its 10th to 90th percentile has a large impact, increasing the likelihood of dispute initiation by 319.6% (.021 to .089) when the dyad has had a recent fatal MID over the issue. The effect drops dramatically to 10.4% (.038 to .042) when there have been no recent fatal disputes over the issue. Thus, we conclude strong support for the fourth hypothesis—diversionsary opportunities are greatly enhanced by previous militarization of the issue.

We find little support for our final hypothesis, which predicts that issue-specific rivalries will enhance opportunities for diversionsary behavior. While the interaction term in Model 5 has the expected positive sign, it fails to attain statistical significance ( $p < .230$ ). This is confirmed in Figure 1. While the point estimate for CPI within rivalries is larger than that for non-rivalries, the heavy overlap of the confidence intervals suggests no support for the fifth hypothesis. We tested this

<sup>20</sup> Neither the estimates for the control variables nor aggregate statistics for the models are altered in re-running the analysis, so we omit them from Table 1 and display them in Figure 1 alone. Full results are available for replication from the authors.

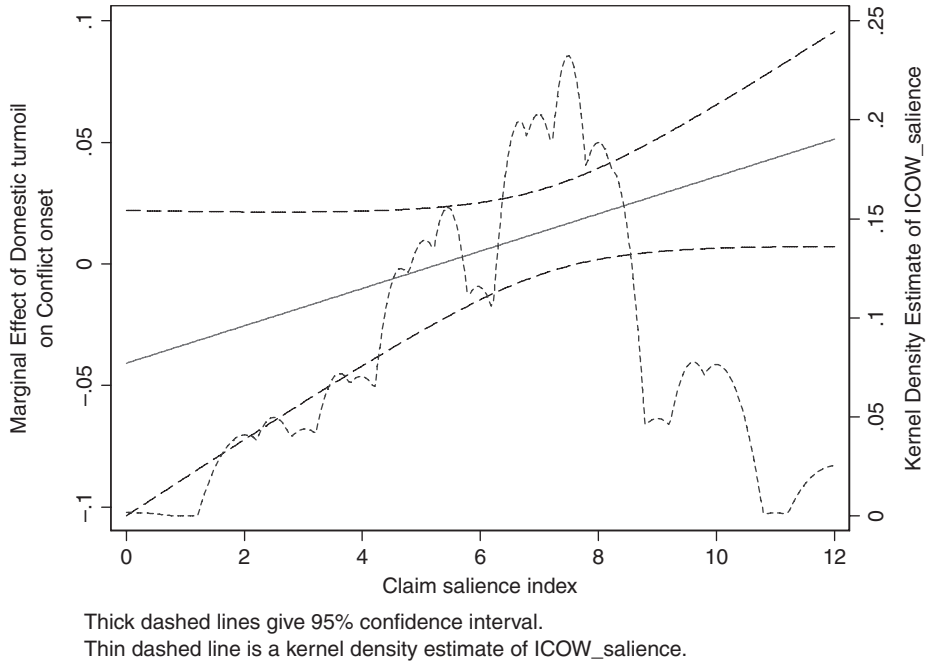


Figure 2. Effect of CPI on MID Initiation Conditioned on Issue Claim Salience

relationship further by considering Goertz and Diehl’s (1993) full dataset of rivalries (i.e. we tested all rivalries rather than only those that are specific to ICOW issues) and Thompson’s (2001) strategic rivalry measure. Neither changed our conclusion.

The contrasting findings between recently fatal MID’s and issue-specific rivalries offer two interesting conclusions. First, leaders are more apt to use diversionary tactics in the context of issue claims following fatal MID’s as opposed to minor displays of force. Second, the number of previous MID’s over the issue has a smaller impact than the severity of the issue immediately preceding the diversionary opportunity. Combining these conclusions with the findings from Mitchell and Prins (2004), therefore, we can conclude that diversionary uses of force are dramatically heightened in the midst of rivalries when there is not an ongoing contentious issue. However, within ongoing disputes over territorial, river or maritime issues, looking at past fatal militarized disputes and issue salience provides the most leverage in understanding diversionary behavior. This empirical result could also be an artifact of the way we code issue rivalries, which are specific to particular issues. Many enduring rivals that engage in repeated militarized disputes contend over multiple contentious issues. This would mute the effect of rivalry in any given dyadic issue claim year, as it would not capture interdependencies across issue claims.

Finally, we generally see the expected effects for the control variables. Higher levels of relative power seem to decrease the likelihood of dispute initiation, which supports previous findings from Mitchell and Prins (2004). However, the measure

fails to attain statistical significance in any of our models ( $p$ -values range from .283 to .337). Distance and joint democracy have the predicted negative and significant effect on dispute initiation. This confirms a plethora of work suggesting that large distances decrease opportunities for violence, and that democracies are less war-prone. The innovation here is that these relationships hold even within ongoing issue disputes, which lends further support to similar findings from Hensel et al. (2008). The substantive impacts of distance and joint democracy also provide a baseline to improve our understanding of the substantive impact of the primary independent variables. As we can see in Figure 1, the substantive impacts of distance and joint democracy on MID initiation are readily comparable to the measures supporting our hypotheses, which suggests that our theoretical mechanisms of interest have similar impacts on dispute initiation as variables that have been found to be quite robust in previous literature.

## **Discussion**

The move to the dyadic unit of analysis in the early 1990s was a watershed event for conflict studies, as it opened up new avenues for testing a plethora of hypotheses in the conflict literature. While Bremer's (1992) path-breaking study identified relationships for many variables we now consider to be the "usual suspects" in conflict models (e.g. contiguity, joint democracy, major power status), his research design included many pairs of states with no significant opportunities for militarized conflict. Studies following in the dyadic tradition refined this opportunity set by focusing on various structural conditions for conflict opportunities, including geographical proximity, capabilities, and alliance ties. Yet even in more restricted sets of politically relevant or politically active dyads, there is still considerable variation in the extent to which pairs of states have opportunities for conflict. We provide a new conceptualization for conflict opportunity by drawing on an issue-based approach to world politics and linking it to diversionary studies of conflict. This integration provides a two-level game approach to thinking about conflict opportunities as it meshes states' external environments with domestic imperatives for conflict initiation.

In a general sample of politically relevant dyads, we show that states with specific issues in contention, such as border or maritime disputes, have a significantly higher probability of militarized conflict than non-issue claim dyads. This follows nicely upon work showing similar patterns for territorial claims, whereby an ongoing border dispute makes the initiation and escalation of militarized disputes much more likely. We also limit our analyses to pairs of states with active issue claims, using the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) dataset. We find that states are much more inclined to initiate militarized conflict to pursue their issue-related goals if they are facing domestic turmoil (e.g. inflation), and if the issue at stake is highly salient and has resulted in prior conflict. These findings suggest that states are quite strategic when timing the use of force, as they look to take advantage of favorable domestic conditions when presented with external opportunities for interstate conflict.

Issue claim dyads represent an important empirical domain for testing conflict theories. As we show, not only do these pairs of states have ongoing opportunities for conflict, but there is also significant variation in the importance of various

issues at stake. By measuring issue salience, the issue-based approach can delineate cases that are very likely to experience militarization from those that will remain peaceful. Adding a diversionary perspective helps to pinpoint the timing of coercive strategies more effectively because domestic conditions change much more frequently than structural conditions like contiguity, major power status, or issue salience.

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*Mitchell & Thyne: Diversionary Behavior*

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