

Routledge Handbook of American Foreign Policy

Edited by
Steven W. Hook
Christopher M. Jones

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The Use of Military Force

Brandon C. Prins and Mark Souva

On October 6, 2001, President George W. Bush authorized military action against Afghanistan. The following day U.S. aircraft bombed Taliban and al Qaeda forces in and around five major Afghan cities. Sixty-three days later on December 9, Kandahar fell and Taliban leader Mullah Omar escaped to Pakistan. Only sixteen days later, U.S. Army and Marine forces began their rapid march towards Baghdad from their bases in Kuwait. Within three weeks, Iraqi forces had surrendered and Baghdad had fallen.¹ Afghanistan and Iraq are the two most recent uses of military force by the United States but these episodes are hardly unique. By one estimate, the United States has dispatched troops abroad 291 times from 1798 through 2008 (Grimmett 2009). Beginning with actions against the French and Barbary Pirates under Presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and ending with measures directed at al Qaeda in Afghanistan and other locations under President Bush, the United States has projected, and actively continues to project, its power overseas.

Decisions to use military force not only can be historically consequential (think President Johnson's decision to send additional combat forces to Vietnam in 1965), but they also are subject to extensive scholar inquiry. Indeed, most general theoretical models of international politics seek in part to explain organized violence among nation-states. Both realism and liberalism, for example, address the prospects of cooperative behavior among critical actors on the world stage. Still, a complete explanation of war remains elusive and data collection projects that record instances of military conflict have so far failed to offer many non-trivial generalizations about the use of force (Vasquez 1993: 3; also see Leng 2002; Zinnes 2002). Obviously, part of the problem is the complexity violent social conflict presents. Not only are there likely to be multiple causal paths to the same outcome, but relationships may be conditional and nonlinear as well (Bremer 1993; Vasquez 1993). Further, scholars continue to debate the ontological and epistemological foundations of social science (e.g., Wendt 1999).

Models of strictly U.S. conflict behavior also appear to have produced few unambiguous inferences. Given its status and global power reach, empirical evidence indicates that the United States has a higher propensity to engage in militarized conflict than the average state, but this is historically true of most major powers. Some evidence suggests regime type of target states plays an important role in U.S. decision making as do relative military power and partisanship. Yet even these relationships are not robust to model specification, data source, or concept operationalization. What, then, do we know about the use of force by American

presidents? That is, what theoretical explanations do we have for U.S. conflict behavior and does the empirical evidence support certain conjectures or refute others?

In this chapter, we map a general model of conflict process onto U.S. uses of force. We do this to explore systematically whether the United States is unique in its conflict behavior. Does the United States behave as other states when it comes to using force abroad? Or are the forces that press leaders to militarize contentious issues absent in the U.S. case? Can we observe certain trends in U.S. conflict behavior and are these trends similar to those exhibited by other powerful states? Finally, we assess the extent to which theoretical models of conflict process provide leverage in explaining U.S. uses of force.

We begin by reviewing theoretical explanations for U.S. decisions to use force. Then, we briefly describe and evaluate the empirical evidence relating to violent conflict in the international system. Next, we describe several datasets that record instances of militarized conflict and we compare the United States to other major and minor powers. We conclude by reviewing the basic premises we established for this chapter and reassess the empirical evidence on U.S. conflict behavior.

Explaining Violent Interstate Conflict

U.S. foreign policy has been strongly influenced by models of international politics that center on the role of power. Realists, such as Hans Morgenthau (1948) defined state interests as the accumulation of power and he advised leaders to implement foreign policies that considered the distribution of power in the international system crucial to peace and stability. This view of international politics seemingly inspired a generation of scholars and policy makers in the United States. The realist concern with systemic balances of power became a foundational stone in the construction of U.S. grand strategy after World War II (also see Wolfers 1951). One of the prime architects, George Kennan (1947: 576), wrote that "Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force ..." (also see Risse-Kappen 1996). Thus, containment entered the lexicon of international politics and balancing Soviet power drove U.S. foreign policy. The application of military force became a means to affect both the actual balance of power between the United States and Soviet Union, but also the perception of the balance of power as well.

The use of force by U.S. leaders also serves as a means of demonstrating resolve (Schelling 1966; Blechman and Kaplan 1978). That is, not only is it useful to possess power, but it is essential that foreign leaders believe one is willing to use such power. Schelling, for example, maintains that the U.S. intervention in Korea beginning in 1950 primarily was about resolve. "We lost 30,000 dead in Korea to save face for the [United States] and the United Nations (UN), not to save South Korea for the South Koreans, and it was undoubtedly worth it," Schelling wrote (1966: 124–125). "Soviet expectations about the behavior of the [United States] are one of the most valuable assets we possess in world affairs." More recently, President George W. Bush sought to convince terrorist groups, such as al Qaeda, that the United States was not a paper tiger, but in fact willing to incur significant casualties in defending and securing U.S. interests. Such military actions also provide information to U.S. leaders about rival forces and intentions (Fearon 1995; Reiter 2003). This resource is crucial in a world where actors have incentives to mislead opponents about their revisionist ambitions.

If the realist tradition in U.S. foreign policy focuses attention on the role of military capabilities and power more generally in explaining decisions to use force, liberal thought defines human freedom (and its promotion) as a critical element driving state behavior (Franceschet 2001). President Woodrow Wilson's moral outrage with actions taken by European leaders during

World War I led him to propose an international system characterized by democracy, the rule of law, and free trade (Wilson 1918; also see Keylor 2001), all of which would guarantee U.S. national security. Wilson's call was revived by President Ronald Reagan who said in a speech to the British Parliament in June of 1982, "let us now begin a major effort to secure the best—a crusade for freedom that will engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation. For the sake of peace and justice, let us move toward a world in which all people are at last free to determine their own destiny" (Reagan 1982).

Yet, as Doyle (1986) recognizes, liberalism both promulgates a pacific union while simultaneously justifying aggression. The United States, in particular, legitimates the use of force by citing the positive security effects of democratic regimes. Echoing Woodrow Wilson, former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot (1996, 63) insisted that "only in an increasingly democratic world will the American people feel themselves truly secure." Military interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo were in part designed to secure democratic liberties in the face of ethnic conflict and political repression. In 2002, President George W. Bush articulated a similar vision, which was defined in the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States. "The aim of this strategy," the document stated, "is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity." In 2003, Bush connected the Iraq invasion to the spread of democracy. "Iraq's progress toward self-determination and democracy brings hope to other oppressed people in the region and throughout the world. It is the rise of democracy that tyrants fear and terrorists seek to undermine" (Bush 2003).

Liberalism further rejects a common realist distinction between international and domestic politics (Moravcsik 1997; Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). Indeed, leader decisions to militarize contentious issues are inherently political. Not only can military interventions provoke disapproval due to the cost in lives and treasure lost, but such policy adventures can distract leaders from addressing key domestic concerns that are of greater concern to constituents. As such, theoretical explanations for violent conflict increasingly model the political interests of policy makers. Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995), for example, reject the state as the primary unit of analysis in international politics (also see Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962). Leaders are the key unit and their primary objective is to remain in office not necessarily to secure the country from predation or maximize power as realists assume. A theoretical focus on leaders not only rejects the unitary state actor assumption held by most realists (and many institutionalists as well), but it also opens up what heretofore had been the black box of the state. Decisions to use military force have obvious domestic-political consequences, which leaders presumably consider during policy deliberations. However, decisions to use military force are also driven by domestic-political needs. Snyder (1991) insists that governing elites develop foreign policies that serve their domestic political interests. And, in selling such policies, leaders use past events to create a useful image that justifies and legitimates the policy itself.²

The domestic-political environment further influences decisions to use force by shaping the preferences of leaders and governments (Moravcsik 1997). Most structural theories of international politics (realist and institutionalist alike) completely ignore the problem of preference formation since security alone is assumed to drive state behavior (and power is the way to security). Thus, preferences are irrelevant in such models. Nonetheless, many structural theorists implicitly assume that preferences vary across states when explaining violent conflict. Gilpin (1981), for example, allows for revisionist and status quo actors, while Walt (2005) distinguishes states that are perceived as threatening (see Katzenstein 1996). Grieco (1988: 501) even acknowledges that state concerns about relative gains in power will vary depending on whether "a state transits from relationships in what Deutsch termed a 'pluralistic security community' to those approximating a state of war," which implicitly is a recognition that

beliefs about how power will be used influences policy choices. Thus, distinguishing states by revisionism, threat, or relative gains concerns does not depend solely on variation in material capabilities, but rather stems from leader perceptions of a rival's intentions. Such notions imply that ideas, values, and identities play a role in international politics. How else can one explain why the United States considers states such as Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and, for a time, Libya critical threats when much more powerful countries such as Great Britain, France, and India engender no such fears?

For liberals, state preferences emerge from the capture of governing institutions by social groups (Moravcsik 1997). In this way, preferences can change depending on the coalition that wins office. "Government policy," as Moravcsik (1997: 518) writes, "is constrained by the underlying identities, interests, and power of individuals and groups who constantly pressure the central decision makers to pursue policies consistent with their preferences." One should expect, then, that not only will different groups vary in their propensities to use military force, but these same groups will also differ on the actors deemed threatening. That is, both the centrality of military force in a state's foreign policy and the extent to which security drives decision making will depend in part on the values that groups bring to power. In this way, Republicans and Democrats should be expected to react differently to crises that emerge around the world. Further, changes in regimes should lead to foreign policy reassessment. Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union improved markedly with the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, in part because he brought a cohort of leaders to power that sought to redefine the ideological and geostrategic rivalry (Herman 1996; Haas 2007).³ This trend continued with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of Boris Yeltsin. The move from authoritarianism to democracy signaled a reshaping of preferences that would naturally be more aligned with the goals of U.S. leaders and thus allow for greater collaboration rather than conflict.

Theoretical models, such as realism and liberalism, offer different assessments about what matters when it comes to deploying force abroad. Realism assumes conflict in the international system is endemic due to the system's anarchical structure, and points to material capabilities driving foreign policy decisions in a world characterized by self-help and revisionism. Military force, then, is necessary and useful in defending states against violent predators. Liberalism, in contrast, assumes that preference variation, instead of variation in material capabilities, drives conflict in international politics. In turn, liberalism posits that preference variation is mostly a function of regime similarity, economic interdependence, and economic development. Military capabilities certainly play an important role in foreign policy decision making, but only among states that fear or distrust one another. Fear and distrust are not endemic to international politics, but are produced by leader beliefs and through the foreign policy behavior of governments. Historically, the formulation of U.S. grand strategy and beliefs about the efficacy of military force in accomplishing foreign policy goals reflect the influence these two theoretical traditions have on U.S. policy makers. Indeed, policy debates in the United States frequently revolve around whether U.S. security is defined solely by military power or more by the support for and spread of democratic regimes. In the next section, we turn to the evaluation of extant empirical evidence relating to violent conflict among states. How have key theoretical concepts, such as power and preferences been operationalized and what influence do such factors have on decisions to use force?

Conflict Among States: The Evidence

While a definitive theoretical explanation for the use of military force by governments remains elusive, a growing body of empirical evidence identifies a key set of structural factors that

appear to correlate robustly with violent conflict. Indeed, a standard set of control variables regularly appear in most empirical models of interstate conflict, which is tacit recognition that a limited base of core knowledge has been produced. More proximate causes of dispute militarization remain in question, but increasingly factors, such as the political environment confronting elites, are being explored. Such critical micro-level factors must be part of any explanation of decision making that leads to the use of force inasmuch as leaders risk electoral punishment for foreign policy failure.

Two structural factors in particular appear to influence the decision by political elites to militarize contentious issues. Contiguity and regime type both strongly correlate with the propensity for armed conflict. Geographical proximity creates opportunities for interaction, which can generate conflicts of interest, while geographical distance, in contrast, not only reduces such interactions, but also makes it more difficult to project power (Boulding 1962; Vasquez 1995). The empirical evidence from monadic and dyadic models consistently shows contiguity important in explaining militarized conflict. Souva and Prins (2006), for example, conclude that each additional land border increases the probability of fatal conflict onset by over 11 percent, and Senese (2005) observes the likelihood of dispute onset to be seventeen times higher for contiguous dyads. Measures of great circle distance also negatively correlate with a state's propensity for armed conflict (Russett and Oneal 2001). For powerful states, the constraint of distance is likely reduced. Yet even powerful states run into supply problems, and blue water navies cannot completely overcome the stopping power of water.

Regime type affects conflict propensities by signaling a state's foreign policy aims and its ability to be trusted, as well as the political constraints leaders confront. Indeed, democracies have seemingly created pluralistic security communities where the harmful effects of anarchy are better controlled (Deutsch et al. 1957; Risse-Kappen 1996; Russett and Oneal 2001). The use of force among democratic states is nearly nonexistent and contentious territorial issues that drive violent conflict in many parts of the world are largely absent in democratic interactions (Mitchell and Prins 1999). Russett and Oneal (2001: 108) note that increasing a country's polity score by one standard deviation reduces the risk of dispute involvement by over 45 percent, while a weak link score of negative 10 (that is, a strong authoritarian state) increases conflict propensity by over 100 percent. Further, democratic states rarely contend over territorial issues, but when they do they are more likely than non-democracies to resolve the issues nonviolently (Mitchell and Prins 1999; Huth and Allee 2002; Gibler 2007). These findings are robust across various model specifications (see Goenner 2004), which has led Gleditsch (1995: 297) to conclude that democracy is a "near-perfect sufficient condition for peace."

National material power and alliance portfolios also represent common control variables in models of violent conflict. Yet, extant empirical evidence presents a mixed picture with regards to when and how such factors affect conflict propensities. Dyadic models of militarized conflict generally show symmetry in capabilities increasing the probability of conflict with asymmetry in capabilities decreasing it. But the relationship may be more nuanced than this (see Kadera 2001), and it remains unclear whether it applies similarly to major and minor powers. Further, theoretical models predict very different relationships when considering power and conflict (e.g., Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979; Organski and Kugler 1980; Schweller 1994). Alliances, on the other hand, generally are expected to reduce the use of force among states, but the evidence from large-N studies seems sensitive to model specification (see Ray 2003). It is likely that alliances anticipate conflict rather than deter it, and material capabilities may drive foreign policy decision making but only in dyadic contexts characterized by fear and rivalry.

Increasingly, economic development and territoriality appear in cross-national models of armed conflict as well. Wealthy, developed countries appear unwilling to incur the costs

of fighting and occupying territory when essential resources can be obtained more cheaply through trade (Rosecrance 1986). Indeed, Rosecrance (1986) maintains that the most developed states should be particularly peaceful since the costs of using force and the benefits provided by trade are both larger for industrialized societies. The U.S. intervention in Iraq beginning in 2003 clearly shows the high costs of invading and occupying a foreign country, even for as wealthy and powerful a state as the United States. Hegre (2000) concludes that development strongly reduces fatal conflict involvement by states (also see Mousseau 2000 and Gartzke 2007); and Gartzke and Rohner (2006) maintain that returns obtained through occupation no longer exceed the price of building and sustaining military forces.

Despite physical land assets becoming economically less important as countries industrialize, territory remains a contentious issue, one that appears to generate a tremendous amount of violent conflict. This may be because territory partly defines states and thus identity itself is tied to pieces of land (Vasquez 1993; Hensel 2001; Hensel and Mitchell 2005). Or perhaps territory invites aggression because it is through strategic passes that state security may be compromised. Whatever the exact reason (and both likely are important), Vasquez (1993, 1995) concludes that territory is one of the strongest correlates of militarized aggression, and the emergence of rivalry often follows the onset of territorial claims. It further appears that battle fatalities are considerably higher in militarized disputes involving territorial stakes (Senese 1996; Hensel 1999; Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004) and that territorial disputes diffuse geographically at higher rates when compared to conflicts over other issues (Braithwaite 2006). As a result, territorial disputes are not only more likely to expand across national frontiers, increasing the chances of full-scale war, but they also increase the probability that additional militarized disputes will erupt in the future (Vasquez and Henehan 2001). Thus, territory frequently generates underlying hostility between states that is both difficult to resolve and often leads to the use of force (Leng and Singer 1988).

Structural conditions are critical to explanations of violent conflict because they define the context in which foreign policy decisions are made. Indeed, the underlying milieu confronting policy makers shapes perceptions about the immediacy of security threats as well as the intentions of other actors. But to understand more fully decisions to use force, the political context leaders cope with must also be considered. Domestic-political opposition, for example, not only shapes leader incentives with regard to the use of force, but such opposition can heighten the electoral risks of foreign policy failure. Further, foreign rivals can observe domestic threats to leader power and act accordingly. Perceived leader weakness may invite militarized challenges as rivals anticipate concessions to help avoid more costly and electorally risky escalations (see Schultz 2005).

Two micro-level factors in particular seem to play an important role in decision making. First, leaders that perceive international politics as driven by nationalism and material power appear more willing to pursue policies of confrontation and aggression (Vasquez 1993). Keller (2005), for example, finds hawkish leaders more likely than dovish leaders to militarize crisis situations. Indeed, when such hawkish leaders are presented with a military challenge, the reciprocation of force occurs nearly 90 percent of the time. For hawks, then, being targeted confirms their belief that the world is full of violent predators that must be resisted with military force. This may also in part explain empirical evidence that indicates political parties of the right tend to have higher conflict initiation propensities than parties of the left. If right-oriented parties represent voters who are more internationalist and/or militant in their policy preferences, then the political costs associated with dispatching troops abroad are lower (Palmer, London, and Regan 2004; Koch and Cranmer 2007).

The second micro-level factor that appears important when it comes to foreign policy decision making is domestic political opposition. If parties out of power desire to return to power, then accentuating policy differences enables voters to differentiate incumbents from

challengers. These same voters, then, according to Reiter and Tillman (2002: 813) have "a chance to cast judgment on the incumbents' performance by voting out leaders who pursue unpopular policies, such as unwanted wars." Further, political opponents can draw attention to policy failure, which can create the perception among voters that the current leader is incompetent. Couple strong partisan opposition with a legislative institution that is formally allocated significant control over foreign policy, and leaders are expected to refrain from high-risk actions, such as using force abroad.

Party control and political opposition also affect conflict propensities by signaling rival states. If political parties evince different preferences with regard to the use of force, then foreign governments can observe the behavioral consequences of such ideological divergence and base their foreign policy choices in part on the partisan disposition of a government (Schultz 2005). Foreign heads of state would be expected to target countries militarily when the probability of reciprocal force is low. This may be the prevailing state of affairs when more dovish left leaning parties are in power and they confront potent partisan opposition.

In the next section, the structural and political contexts identified above as correlating cross-nationally with the use of military force will be explored in the U.S. case. That is, do the factors that appear to influence the conflict propensities of states in general, apply to U.S. decision making in particular? This question enables an assessment of U.S. foreign policy from a broader theoretical orientation, which will provide valuable insights into American uses of force.

The United States as Unique?

Two separate data projects will be used here to assess U.S. conflict behavior: the correlates of war militarized interstate dispute datafile and the military intervention by powerful states dataset. The precise coding rules for each project are distinctive, but each research effort intends to record information on the decisions by governments to militarize contentious issues. Further, neither data project is U.S.-specific, and, therefore, the conflict behavior of other states (especially other great powers) can be assessed alongside the United States.

The Conflict Record

The Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) dataset represents an attempt to "understand how state interactions lead to interstate war" (Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996: 18). The threat, show, or use of military force defines events in the MID datafile and establishes that a disagreement among two or more states has escalated to a "serious" level. Currently, over 2,300 militarized disputes are recorded by the MID dataset globally speaking, with nearly 1,500 occurring after 1945. A major power is involved in over 1,600 of these disputes, which is remarkable since only nine states achieve great power status over the last 200 years. The United States participates in over 300 of these conflicts, which represents 15 percent of the total global conflicts that erupted.

The MID datafile shows a clear increase in dispute involvement following World War II with the United States taking a more active and leading role in global affairs. Conflict in the nineteenth century was driven mostly by territorial disputes with Spain and Mexico, resulting in two wars. The United States also continued to have lingering conflict with Great Britain, which largely ended after the Venezuelan Crisis in 1903. Since 1945 the United States has been involved in over 200 militarized disputes, which means that over 60 percent of U.S. disputes occurred following the end of World War II. Many of these disputes centered on the Soviet

Union, China, and communism more generally. In fact, 25 percent of U.S. post-1945 disputes were with Russia or China confirming the salience of these two countries to U.S. security and geo-political interests. Not surprisingly given their decrease in relative power, both France and Great Britain, despite their belligerent pasts, have substantially fewer disputes in the post-World War II period when compared to the United States, Russia, and China.

The Military Intervention by Powerful States (MIPS) dataset records major uses of force by the five UN Security Council members from 1946–2003 (Sullivan and Koch 2009). In contrast to MIDs, the events recorded by this dataset are limited to interventions involving at least 500 regular military personnel in a combat-ready capacity. Of the 126 interventions coded, 36 involve the United States. These episodes include, for example, advisers sent to quell the communist insurgency in Greece in 1948, Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989, and President Clinton's deployment of military forces to Haiti in 1994 to restore Aristide to power. Of course, wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf are included as well. As a comparison, Russia intervened 20 times from 1946–2003 with the most substantial deployments being the Hungarian uprising of 1956, Prague Spring of 1968, and Afghanistan beginning in 1979.

Correlates of U.S. Conflict

The two datasets described above suggest that the United States is one of the most conflict-prone countries in the international system, at least since 1945. Yet, such descriptive information does not tell us about the forces that drive U.S. conflict behavior nor can it reliably offer cross-national comparisons. For these issues we need evidence from empirical research that systematically controls for the influence of multiple causal factors.

Extant models of U.S. conflict reveal behavior that is somewhat unique compared to the conflict behavior among states more generally, but perhaps not as much as one might have anticipated given the role the United States plays in global politics. Indeed, the forces that drive conflict behavior in average dyadic contexts also appear to drive U.S. dispute behavior. However, the substantive influence of these factors differs, sometimes considerably, when examining the U.S. case. For example, contiguity is an extremely strong and robust correlate of militarized conflict among states in general, even among the great powers (see Maoz and Russett 1993).⁴ Yet the presence of land borders actually reduces the incidence of conflict in the U.S. case. Unlike other countries with multiple neighbors, the United States confronts no militarily hostile countries along its northern and southern borders. In fact, between 1950 and 2000 the United States has only seven militarized disputes with its contiguous neighbors: six with Canada and one with Mexico in 1956. None of these conflicts resulted in any battle fatalities. The lack of border conflict, though, has not meant a lack of conflict more generally for the United States. Throughout the entire post-World War II era (except for the Clinton administration), the United States has displayed a much higher average conflict propensity than every other state in the international system. The probability of a dispute between any two countries in a given year is obviously extremely low, but comparatively speaking the United States is much more likely than other states to find itself involved in militarized conflict. That being said, the conflict propensity of the United States has dropped substantially since 1950. The rise in the number of democratic states may in part explain this trend. In 1950, for example, there were approximately twenty-nine democratic states in the international system. By 1999, this figure had jumped to eighty-four with many countries having transitioned after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Soviet collapse in 1991.⁵

If contiguity increases, the probability of violent conflict, geographic distance unsurprisingly reduces it (Oneal and Russett 1999). Most countries do not possess the material capabilities to project power far from their own territorial borders (Boulding 1962). For major powers,

though, distance does not significantly reduce the incidence of serious conflicts; those involving battle fatalities. This reality suggests great powers not only have interests that span the globe, but also the ability to use military force when and where needed regardless of geographic distance. Given its large military budgets and technological advantages, the United States shows a greater capability than even other major powers to project force over distance. The average distance between countries with fatal MIDs is approximately 650 miles. For the four UN Security Council members, excluding the United States, the average distance between countries with fatal MIDs is over 1,800 miles. The average distance for the United States is over 5,000 miles, telling evidence about the power projection capacity of the United States.⁶

Alliances also appear to influence U.S. behavior differently than other states. While such security pacts tend to reduce conflict occurrence in most strategic relationships, for the great powers and the United States, there appears to be little difference in conflict involvement among allies and non-allies alike (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992). This finding likely results from the unique position powerful states have in security relationships. Not only must alliance leaders deter rival states, but they also must preserve alliances from internal strife. It also appears to result from the unique context of the Cold War where the United States formed defense alliances with numerous countries against the Soviet Union, but without first resolving other contentious issues it had with these same states. Consider that the United States has many militarized disputes with countries in the Western Hemisphere, and most of these states belong to the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (the Rio Pact).

One of the strongest correlates of militarized conflict for all dyads is the presence of outstanding territorial claims (Vasquez 1993, 1995; Huth 1996). In fact, Senese (2005) finds the probability of militarized conflict to be over thirty times higher when a territorial claim exists among contiguous states. For the United States, conflict is more likely with countries in which it has a territorial claim, but only slightly so. This difference is driven both by the number of territorial claims that states have as well as the salience of those claims. The United States has only six claims with other countries in the post-World War II period. In contrast, Great Britain has nineteen, France eighteen, and China fourteen.⁷ Further, five of the six U.S. territorial claims were resolved by 1977. Only Guantanamo Bay, Cuba remains unresolved.

A strong correlate of peace among states is the presence of democratic governments (Maoz and Russett 1993). Joint democracy substantially reduces the incidence of militarized conflict among all states, but especially the United States. Between 1950 and 2000, the United States had only fifteen disputes with other democratic states, and only one resulted in battle fatalities. This conflict was the invasion of Panama in 1989 ordered by President George H.W. Bush. The other fourteen involved boat seizures by naval authorities, border violations (usually by U.S. military aircraft), and one clash with Israeli military forces in 1976. This fact supports more general empirical evidence relating to democratic conflict behavior. Prins and Sprecher (1999), for example, observe higher conflict reciprocation rates for democratic states when targeted by autocrats and Caprioli and Trumbore (2006) find that non-democratic states are much more likely than democracies to use force first. It appears, then, that democratic leaders, particularly U.S. presidents, condition their foreign policy behavior on the regime type of other states.

Finally, power does appear to affect conflict behavior as realists anticipate. Yet the evidence indicates preponderance drives conflict propensities lower not higher (Maoz 2004). For the United States, the effect appears to be stronger than in the more general dyadic case. The probability of conflict onset for the United States at parity is higher than the average state. Importantly, though, the likelihood of dispute onset for the United States drops substantially as the U.S. power advantage increases over other states. In contrast, the likelihood of conflict at parity for all states, including other great powers, is lower at parity compared to the United States and does not decrease nearly as much when increasing dyadic power asymmetry. Given

that on average the United States is over twenty-two times more powerful than other states, U.S. military capabilities seem to have countervailing effects. On the one hand, military dominance offers U.S. leaders a tool few others have; a tool frequently used by American presidents. On the other hand, rivals clearly recognize the overwhelming advantages the United States possesses and try to accommodate American demands.

At the micro-level, some extant evidence suggests U.S. decisions to use force are influenced by the party in power and political opposition. Prins (2001), for example, observes dispute initiation rates to be higher for Republican presidential administrations compared to their Democratic counterparts and contends the relationship is at least in part produced by the more hawkish orientation of the Republican Party (also see Gowa 1998). Howell and Pevehouse (2005) theorize that partisan support in Congress provides political cover for presidents to use force. They observe unified government positively associated with major uses of force in the post-World War II era, although no relationship emerges when minor uses of force are examined.

Dyadically, neither party of the president nor divided government seems to influence U.S. conflict behavior. However, these results merely indicate that domestic-political forces fail to propel the United States toward violent conflict with specific countries. It may still be that certain types governments display a higher than average propensity to use military force as a tool of statecraft. In fact, if one looks from 1946 to 1992 (as Prins 2001 does) a sizable difference emerges in the number of militarized disputes entered into across administrations: 117 during Republican administrations and 63 during Democratic administrations. Yet, if one updates the data to include the Clinton administration, the party divergence nearly disappears. A weak positive association remains between Republican presidential administration and militarized disputes using a monadic research design, but Clinton's 32 dispute onsets over his eight years in office substantially increases the Democratic party numbers.⁸

Evidence linking political opposition to the use of force remains inconclusive as well, both generally and in the U.S. case (see Howell and Pevehouse 2005; Ireland and Gartner 2001; Chiozza and Goemans 2003; Marshall and Prins 2010). Brulé (2006), for example, finds that divided government, when coupled with economic weakness, increases the likelihood of force being used, and Prins (2001) observes militarized dispute initiations to increase against the United States when presidents face divided government. But Prins (2001) also finds no relationship between U.S. initiations of force and the presence or absence of divided government. On average, there were 3.8 MIDs per year during unified government in the post-World War II era and 3.9 during divided government over the same time period. Similarly, the yearly average of major military interventions is no different during divided (.62) versus unified government (.61). Extant evidence suggests, then, that congressional opposition does not strongly or robustly influence presidential decisions to use military force.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to describe and explain U.S. conflict behavior. We do this by mapping a general model of violent conflict onto decisions by U.S. presidents to militarize contentious issues. While U.S. foreign policy behavior is heavily studied by scholars, most models of U.S. uses of force fail to integrate theory and evidence from research on dyadic conflict processes and instead rely upon unique aspects of the U.S. case. This is unfortunate since a growing body of empirical evidence identifies certain structural features of dyadic contexts as robustly correlating with the onset of militarized conflict. If such research provides a solid foundation for how to think about the use of force, it seems unwise to ignore it when assessing the forces propelling U.S. leaders into military confrontations.

Despite historical and more recent claims of American exceptionalism, we find U.S. conflict behavior to closely follow the theoretical expectations derived in general models of interstate armed conflict. Regime type, relative power, territorial claims, and geographic distance all strongly affect leader decisions to use military force; U.S. presidents included. Only contiguity and alliances appear to drive decision making differently in the United States when compared to other countries. Land borders strongly increase the likelihood of violent conflict in the average dyadic context, but actually decrease it for the United States, and alliances seemingly are irrelevant in presidential decisions to use force but push most leaders away from violent conflict. The domestic political context U.S. presidents confront also appears to play a negligible role in decisions to use force. Evidence tying partisanship or political opposition to military interventions remains sensitive to modeling choices, such as variable operationalization, the unit of analysis, and temporal domain.

In the future, studies of U.S. conflict behavior need to pay more attention to strategic interaction. Empirical research convincingly demonstrates that leaders consider targets when making foreign policy decisions. Yet, models of U.S. decision making continue to rely heavily on nonstrategic monadic research designs. Further, conflict onset remains only one decision to explore and explain. It would be interesting to examine the duration and termination of conflict and peace with the U.S. case in mind, as well as model attempts by U.S. leaders to resolve contentious issues nonviolently.

Notes

- 1 Prior to both U.S. military interventions, bargaining occurred among high-level political elites. Secretary of State Colin Powell demanded that the Taliban government hand over Osama bin Laden, while President George W. Bush himself called for the surrender of Saddam Hussein in a speech given on March 17, 2003. In both instances, U.S. demands were ignored (see Hendrickson and Gagnon 2008; Lantis and Moskowitz 2008).
- 2 In this way, Munich became the analogy with which Secretary of State Madeleine Albright justified the U.S. response to conflict and political repression in the former Yugoslavia. Interestingly, a similar Hitler analogy was used by Bush II administration officials in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003.
- 3 Herman (1996: 291) maintains that Gorbachev and his team viewed the expansionist and militaristic foreign policies of the past as prolonging a needless and self-destructive rivalry.
- 4 Data on distance and contiguity can be obtained at the Correlates of War website (www.correlatesofwar.org).
- 5 See the Polity Project (<http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>) for information on regime type.
- 6 These data do not indicate exactly where the conflict occurred, only the distance between the capital cities of the countries involved in the disputes.
- 7 The U.S. claims are with the following countries: Cuba, Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Russia (see Huth 1996).
- 8 This relationship does not hold when we consider major military interventions (MIPS). In the post-World War era (1946–2003), Democratic and Republican administrations each account for eighteen interventions.

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