

# Territorial Diversion: Diversionary Theory of War and Territorial Conflict

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*According to the diversionary theory of war, unpopular leaders generate foreign policy crises to both divert the public's attention away from the discontent with their rule and bolster their political fortunes through a rally around the flag effect. I argue that the puzzling lack of clear empirical support for the theory may be due to the underspecification of the theoretical mechanism through which the public reacts to the particular issue at the center of the diversionary "crisis." Because people tend to react to territorial issues intensely, the embattled leader could attempt to manipulate and exploit this proclivity by launching specifically a territorial conflict. By linking government unpopularity with the initiation of militarized territorial conflicts and crises in a global sample of countries, this territorial diversion argument receives strong empirical support. The initiation of fatal militarized disputes over territory is, in addition, linked to economic underperformance.*

According to the diversionary theory of war, the cause of some militarized conflicts is not a clash of salient interests between countries, but rather problematic domestic circumstances. Under conditions such as economic adversity or political unrest, the country's leader may attempt to generate a foreign policy crisis in order both to divert domestic discontent and bolster their political fortunes through a rally around the flag effect (Russett 1990). Yet, despite the wide-ranging popularity of this idea and some evidence of U.S. diversionary behavior (e.g., DeRouen 1995, 2000; Fordham 1998a, 1998b; Hess and Orphanides 1995; James and Hristolouas 1994; James and Oneal 1991; Ostrom and Job 1986), after five decades of research broader empirical support for the theory remains elusive (e.g., Gelpi 1997; Gowa; 1998; Leeds and Davis 1997; Levy 1998; Lian and Oneal 1993; Meernik and Waterman 1996). This has prompted one scholar to conclude that "seldom has so much common sense in theory found so little support in practice" (James 1987, 22), a view reflected in the more recent research (e.g., Chiozza and Goemans 2003, 2004; Meernick 2004; Moore and Lanoue

2003; Oneal and Tir 2006). I argue that this puzzling lack of support could be addressed by considering the possibility that the embattled leader may anticipate<sup>1</sup> achieving their diversionary aims specifically through the initiation of *territorial conflict*<sup>2</sup>—a phenomenon I call territorial diversion.

The use of military force is seen in the diversionary literature as attracting the public's attention, which, in the face of a perceived threat and via the ingroup, outgroup mechanism (Cosser 1956), is in turn expected to translate into a feeling of loyalty to the state and its leader. While I agree with the logic of the attention-grabbing nature of the use of force, I also argue that territorial conflicts have a better capacity to elicit feelings of threat and unity than other issues (e.g., trade, humanitarian intervention), in part because territory speaks more directly and convincingly to the people's instincts and their conceptions of national identity. That territorial conflicts elicit greater emotional investment, mobilization, and societal bonding provides the unscrupulous leader with some important advantages—which may make the territorial diversion logic work better. The question addressed is therefore whether problematic

<sup>1</sup>Leaving the issue of whether diversions actually help leaders (see Chiozza and Goemans 2003, 2004) to future research helps keep the study's scope manageable and is common in diversionary research. Indeed, Smith (1996, 134) argues that diversions need not help leaders in the end in order to motivate them to divert. Because they are already threatened with the loss of power, they simply continue to suffer the same fate should the diversion fail.

<sup>2</sup>I use the term "conflict" as a shorthand for conflict involving military force.

domestic conditions can be linked to territorial conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, reliance on territorial conflicts theoretically opens up the diversionary option to the leaders of just about all countries. This is in contrast to the original version of the theory that relies on the power-projection capability possessed by only the most powerful states; accordingly, few works examine behavior of countries other than the United States.<sup>4</sup> This study joins a small but growing number of recent works evaluating the merits of the diversionary theory cross-nationally, such as Leeds and Davis (1997), Russett and Oneal (2001), Chiozza and Goemans (2003; 2004), Pickering and Kisangani (2005), and Oneal and Tir (2006). None of these works has, however, found strong support for the diversionary theory, highlighting the importance of the current study.

Furthermore, finding evidence in favor of my argument would suggest that some international conflicts are driven by the leader's selfishness—and not by national interest. Potential examples of (perceived) territorial diversions are not difficult to find. The quintessential diversionary case, the Falklands Islands War, is a territorial conflict. More recent stories found in the media include Evo Morales' use of Bolivia's loss of its coastline to Chile in the 1879 War of the Pacific as a way of obtaining support for his rule in the face of continuing protests (Romero 2006); the Thai-Cambodian border dispute over Hindu temples has reportedly been used by both governments to shore up support in face of the former's continuing unpopularity and the latter's upcoming reelection bid (Mydans 2008a, 2008b); Croatia has found the timing of Slovenia's escalation of their border dispute in the run-up to the 2005 and 2008 Slovenian elections suspect (Bernstein 2006; HRT 2008); and after initial conciliatory gestures, South Korea's Roh Moo-hyun has become increasingly intransigent in his dealings with Japan over the Dokto Islands dispute. Faced with low approval ratings and an upcoming election, he clearly attempted to cast the dispute over the remote and uninhabited rock outcroppings as a matter of national pride for the Korean people (*Christian Science*

<sup>3</sup>Beleaguered leaders have nondiversionary options (e.g., resignation, addressing problems, repression, doing nothing, etc.). Investigating why they choose one option over another suggests a wider future research agenda.

<sup>4</sup>For examples of works dealing with Israeli diversionary behavior, see Barzilai and Russett (1990) and Sprecher and DeRouen (2002); for the United Kingdom, see Morgan and Anderson (1999).

*Monitor* 2006). Whether these allegations are consistent with broader patterns is a topic of this work.

The remainder of the study is organized as follows. The next section argues that the potential link between territorial conflict and diversionary theory has not been studied directly and that the link can be utilized to help address some of the most serious critiques that have been leveled against the theory. Theory of territorial diversion is then offered, followed by the research design section. A presentation of empirical results constitutes the penultimate part, while concluding thoughts close the paper.

## **Diversionary Theory of War and Territorial Conflict**

In the voluminous diversionary literature,<sup>5</sup> no prior work has directly linked diversions with territorial conflict. Because so much of the literature studies U.S. behavior (e.g., Fordham 2002; Hess and Orphanides 1995; Ostrom and Job 1986), this is not altogether surprising. U.S. diversionary scenarios often involve far-away targets, not an expansion of U.S. territory. Furthermore, cross-national diversionary works tend to leave the diversionary issue unspecified (for example, see Oneal and Tir 2006; Pickering and Kisangani 2005); this is similarly the case in Tir and Jasinski's (2008) examination of diversion against domestic ethnic minority targets. In contrast, Kisangani and Pickering (2007) implicitly argue against territorial diversions: leaders will opt for low-politics diversions (e.g., humanitarian and socioeconomic interventions) because they have lower costs and risk of escalation, as opposed to high politics, strategic diversions. So, territory would be considered as too problematic to make a good diversionary issue, although this premise is not addressed directly; see also note 7 below.

In the territorial conflict literature, a connection with the diversionary theory is also not made. These works (for a recent and comprehensive review, see Vasquez and Valeriano 2008; Tir and Vasquez 2010) primarily focus on the neorealist-type dynamics operating in the international environment, making studies of the domestic origins of territorial conflict quite rare. An example of an exception examining the domestic politics of territorial disputes is Huth and

<sup>5</sup>For recent and exhaustive reviews, see Pickering and Kisangani (2005), Chiozza and Goemans (2004), DeRouen (2000), Mitchell and Prins (2004), and Oneal and Tir (2006).

Allee (2002), but their focus is on democratic norms and institutions—and not diversionary dynamics.

Neglecting to link territorial and diversionary research is important because the link could be used to address important critiques leveled against the theory. The critiques have emerged from the literature's inability to produce a set of unambiguous, supportive findings. Even though domestic problems may be encouraging leaders to contemplate diversions, other factors may prevent these incentives from being acted upon. Consequently, a reliable pattern between diversionary incentives and use of force may not be detectable. Below, I identify the two most relevant types of critiques and argue that they can be addressed successfully in the context of territorial diversion.

First, Levy (1998; see also Tir and Jasinski 2008) observes that suitable diversionary targets are quite difficult to find. For just about all the states in the international system, the loss of strength gradient (Boulding 1962) is so serious that they are only able to interact militarily with their immediate neighbors. This would limit diversionary opportunities significantly for all but the most powerful states. Furthermore, many countries would make poor targets because they are important economic, security, or diplomatic partners or because the attack would go against the constraints posed by the democratic peace (Russett and Oneal 2001). Cognizant of these issues, Mitchell and Prins (2004), for example, focus on diversions between enduring rivals. Enduring rivals (e.g., India-Pakistan) have a history of antagonism, which indicates that they are willing and able to interacting militarily. Moreover, the context of rivalry can provide an aura of credibility to the leader's claim that their actions are conducted not out of selfish interest but for the benefit of the country. And given their already poor relations, the attacks would not be particularly damaging to their relationship.<sup>6</sup> The problem, however, is that rivalry-related diversionary opportunities are available to only few countries. Enduring rivals constitute only 5.4% of dyads that experience militarized international conflict (Diehl and Goertz 2000) and an even smaller fraction of all dyads (.4% to 3.75%, depending on how politically relevant dyads are defined).

The above concerns may be lessened in the context of territorial diversion. First, the power projection capability is not necessarily an issue because

most territorial conflicts take place precisely between neighboring countries (Tir 2003, 2006; Vasquez 1993). Second, diversionary action has to be perceived by the population as so important that it is persuaded that the conflict (i.e., the diversion) is worth the cost of damaging or even breaking the otherwise important ties. Territorial diversion is arguably in a good position to help the leader do this because territorial issues are seen as so central to the matters of national survival and protection of identity that economic, diplomatic, and other considerations can be subordinated. These important points suggest that diversionary behavior could be a cross-national phenomenon, not limited to the most powerful or rival states.

The second critique challenges diversionary theory's core logical mechanism, which is rooted in the ingroup, outgroup premise (Coser 1956). Diversions are launched to unify a fractured society (i.e., transform it into the ingroup) by painting the foreign enemy as the outgroup.<sup>7</sup> Morgan and Anderson (1999; Morgan and Bickers 1992), however, argue that overcoming the societal division to create a cohesive ingroup is no easy task. If the leader calculates that surmounting this important obstacle is unlikely, then they would presumably be deterred from diverting. I argue below that territorial diversion provides what is probably the most promising option for unifying the society, because territorial issues have the unique ability to speak to and "connect" with the broad swaths of the population.

## Theoretical Argument

In this section, I present arguments specifying why territorial diversion may be particularly attractive for an embattled leader. I contend that territorial diversion can provide the leader with certain advantages, which are unlikely to be found in the realm of conflicts over other issues. People have unique and strong bonds to land, which can be manipulated by the unscrupulous leader them to mask the true intents of their actions, which include rally effects and retention of power.

<sup>6</sup>Even though Tir and Diehl (2002) find that enduring rivalries are typically driven by territorial disputes, a potential link with diversions is not explored.

<sup>7</sup>Kisangani and Pickering (2007), in contrast, argue that diversion is rather about the agenda setting process, which gives the leader the power to shift the public debate away from domestic problems to a low politics (per their argument) diversionary issue. Yet, it is not clear that such diversions can go beyond being distractions and cause rally effects that would heal societal divisions. Territorial issues can arguably accomplish all this.

In explaining why researchers have repeatedly found territory to be the most war prone issue (see Hensel 2000; Tir and Vasquez 2010), Vasquez (1993) notes that humans' tendency to define themselves as territorial creatures is deeply ingrained into their collective genetic and/or cultural inheritance—arguments well known in the sociobiological and evolutionary psychology literatures (e.g., Buss 1995; Valzelli 1981). The tendency is seen in the great willingness of people to fight over economically and strategically worthless land, which suggests that the pursuit of territory is more than just about rational, calculating behavior. It may be either a function of how humans are wired or of learning “that territorial issues . . . are ‘best’ handled by the use of force and violence” (Vasquez 1993, 140). While the related literature debates whether the traits are more inherent or learned, the point is that the bond people feel to land, their anxiety over who controls it, and their willingness to support the use of force to act on territorial disagreements can all potentially be manipulated and exploited by the leader who is seeking to distract the people's attention from the real problems plaguing the country.

A related argument focusing on how people develop their conceptions of self is offered by the constructivist school of thought. Among others, Gottman (1973), Sack (1986), and Touval (1972) find that people become socialized and emotionally attached to the territory they think of as belonging to them. The land becomes an integral part of their identity, ingrained in the national psyche. This even holds in cases where there are only weak objective claims to the land in question. Witness, for example, the fervor by which ordinary Chinese respond to suggestions that Tibet is not legitimately Chinese territory. Or consider the Serbian attitude toward Kosovo. Despite the fact that few Serbs remain there, Milosevic successfully rallied the Serb nation in the late 1980s by arguing that it could hardly afford a repeat of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo where that land was lost. Such predispositions suggest that disagreements over territorial control quickly turn into highly emotionally charged affairs where objective facts hold little sway. In fact, the territorial conflict literature argues that the emotional connections and related proclivities feed into the perceptions of land as zero-sum, indivisible, and unsubstitutable, where compromises are seen as improbable, territorial disputes are thought of as irresolvable, and brute force is counted on as the only real means of obtaining (temporary) control (Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Tir 2006; Vasquez 1993). Critically for this project, the emotions connected to the land are something the unscrupulous

leader can attempt to tap into, manipulate, and exploit for their own gain—much like Milosevic did.

Further relevant insights can be derived from prospect theory (e.g., Jervis 1992; Kahneman and Tversky 1979). According to the theory, people are risk acceptant when they perceive that they are losing (as opposed to gaining) something they value, that is when they are operating in the domain of losses.<sup>8</sup> The reference point separating gains from losses is set according to whether one is trying to protect existing ownership versus acquire something new. Yet, if an individual believes that the object outside of their control rightfully belongs to them, this would imply that the “loss” of the object took place at some point in the past and the person would be in the domain of losses. The psychological reference point is hence not the objective status quo but rather a mental image of the “rightful” distribution of valued resources (Berejikian 2004). Undoing the “loss” thus becomes a priority, even if it involves highly risky actions, because accepting the objective status quo would mean accepting the certain loss.

Connecting these arguments with those of constructivism implies that the tendency to become emotionally attached to the land people think of as their own sets their reference point to the domain of losses, irrespective of whether the defense of currently held land (i.e., an objective loss) or acquisition of land that someone else is controlling (i.e., an objective gain) is in question. That is, by perceiving the disputed land as rightfully theirs, the people interpret not controlling it to mean a loss—regardless of whether this land ever belonged, or how long ago, to them. Consequently, the people become willing to support risky courses of action in the belief that they would be “retaking” the land.

A series of important inferences follows from the above insights. The most basic one is that the above attitudes and tendencies toward territory are common human responses. As such, they apply to the populations of states, which opens them up for manipulation and exploitation by unscrupulous leaders for personal gain. The leader can manufacture, use, or escalate a territorial conflict with another country in an attempt to manipulate the people's emotions into becoming willing to give the leader *carte blanche* or at least a greater benefit of the doubt

<sup>8</sup>DeRouen (1995, 2000) relies on prospect theory to argue that U.S. Presidents will engage in increasingly risky behavior—such as diversionary actions—when they face the prospect of losing office.

for taking what under more objective circumstances may be seen as an unnecessary, questionable, and risky action. The end result, the leader hopes, is that via the mechanism of territorial conflict, the population will increasingly support and rally behind them. Importantly, the above indicates that the leader can expect their manipulation to be more successful when territorial issues are at stake, rather than some more poorly defined threats to the country, including low politics issues that can distract people's attention but not elicit the same level of passion.

Furthermore, because territorial issues are at the heart of human perceptions of identity, they can be used by the leader to overcome societal divisions. The leader can argue that the society as a whole is the ingroup with a common territorial interest and cast the state controlling, or attempting to control, the land that "rightfully" belongs to the leader's country as the outgroup. Few other issues are expected to provide as strong of a bonding experience for a population. Examples of societies like South Korea, which is plagued by deep political divisions, suggest that in the face of territorial crises such as the dispute over the Dokto Islands with Japan, the society becomes more unified. Territory could therefore be one of the few issues that could, at least temporarily, be used by leaders to overcome internal divisions—including those that may be caused precisely by controversy over the leader's rule.

The traditional diversionary argument also relies on portraying the diversionary action as protecting a vital national interest. Yet, the leader's initiation of a crisis with a far-away, unknown-to-the-public foreign enemy (a scenario satirized in the movie *Wag the Dog*) and over an issue not clearly vital to the national interest would have a hard time capturing the public's attention and creating belief in—and let alone fervent support for—the leader. After all, many ordinary people know about the diversionary theory, so the leader has to overcome the public's—and particularly the political opposition's—natural skepticism that the action is a mere diversion meant to manipulate the populace. The issue of land control, via the above-described mechanisms—stands a much better chance of accomplishing these tasks.

In sum, territorial diversions are able (1) to capture the public's attention, (2) to tap into the people's instincts and/or and feelings about their identity, and (3) to help the leader unify a fractured society behind them. The logic of territorial diversion is thus arguably more compelling and plausible than that of the more standard version of the theory. The discussion leads to the following hypothesis.

*H1: Domestic unpopularity problems that threaten the leader's ability to retain effective control over their office are associated with an increased likelihood of territorial conflict initiation.*

Given the relative ease with which the leader can exploit the population's instincts and/or attitudes toward territorial control may make territorial diversion appear a relatively risk-free, no-cost option. Yet, this is certainly not the case. The leader does not know that the diversion will for sure have the desired popularity-boosting effect. They are acting with the *hope* of a rally, but the rally is by no means guaranteed; prior research generally reports only small and short-lasting rallies (e.g., Lian and Oneal 1993; see also Chiozza and Goemans 2004, 424). Furthermore, engaging in prolonged or frequent diversions would likely outlast the desired rally effect, as the public tires of the issue and costs and casualties mount (Gartner and Segura 1998). The leader is hence expected to use diversion sparingly, such as during times when their leadership abilities are in question—just as the hypothesis suggests. Moreover, the diversion carries with it the inherent risk that the action will not go as planned. Becoming embroiled in protracted, escalating, stalemated, costly, or losing conflicts is likely to hurt the leader's popularity (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Their calculus should therefore be affected by a variety of constraints; the key ones are considered control variables and are discussed in the next section.

## Research Design

### Dependent Variables, Spatial-Temporal Domain, and Method of Analysis

In the diversionary research, diversionary activity is not measured directly but rather by associating governmental use of force with diversionary incentive variables that tap into domestic discontent with the government. I follow a similar approach but focus on uses of military force<sup>9</sup> that concern the issue of territorial control. To check the findings' robustness, I utilize three different operationalizations of my dependent variable. The first two versions rely on the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data set

<sup>9</sup>I purposefully do not limit my study to wars. The theory's original name (diversionary theory of war) is a misnomer because a diversion is not meant to start a war. War's high costs generally do not help national leaders retain office (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003).

(Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004), which identifies militarized disputes between countries, their timing, the dispute initiator, whether a territorial revision was sought, and fatality numbers.<sup>10</sup> Combining this information, I identify (1) all territorial MID initiations (my main dependent variable) and (2) fatal territorial MID initiations; I use the fatality restriction because disputes involving fatalities may have an easier time capturing the public's attention and inspiring a rally. Finally, the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project defines a foreign policy crisis as a situation in which the highest-level decision makers perceive "a threat to one or more basic values [to their state], along with an awareness of a finite time for response to the value threat, and a heightened probability of involvement in military hostilities" (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 2000, 3). The project notes the timing of the crisis, perceived initiator (i.e., in this case the state from which the crisis-related threat is emanating), and whether a territorial threat is involved (i.e., threat of integration or annexation of a part of the target's territory). By matching perceived initiators with territorial threats, I derive a list of (3) territorial crisis initiations. Each of the three dependent variables enters into the below-defined data set dichotomously, depending on whether the relevant event took place in a given year.

The directed dyadic approach, which can simultaneously capture conditions within the prospective initiator country as well as the identity of and relationships with potential target states, is utilized. Monadic design, popular in early studies of diversion, is equipped to perform only the first task (Bennett and Stam 2000b). With the help of the EUGene software (Bennett and Stam 2000a), I create a directed dyad-year (my unit of analysis) data set of all contiguous (up to 400 miles of water)<sup>11</sup> pairs of states. The analyses are restricted to the post-World War II period due to availability of economic data.

<sup>10</sup>MIDs are "cases in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state" (Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996, 168). The initiator is the state that takes the first militarized action while a territorial coding notes its attempt "to gain control over a piece of turf that it claims but does not effectively possess" (178).

<sup>11</sup>The spatial restriction is used because disputes and claims over homeland territory occur almost exclusively between neighboring states (Huth and Allee 2002; Vasquez 1993). The 400-mile radius—set by the contiguity project (Stinnett et al. 2002) as the limit beyond which militarized interaction becomes prohibitively costly for most states—serves to capture potential territorial confrontations over islands.

Given the dichotomous structure of the dependent variables, I rely on logit for my analyses. Robust standard errors are employed to account for the observations from the same dyad being related. I use the Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998) binary time-series cross-section correction to account for the fact that my data are composed of several cross-sections (i.e., dyads) and to deal with potential duration dependence as these cross-sections are observed over time. To save space, the associated years of peace and natural cubic spline (with three interior knots) variables are omitted from the table. And finally, all the right-hand-side variables (with the exception of elections) are lagged by one year, in order to make sure that the presumed causes actually precede the use of force; such a setup is also reasonable as it may take a little bit of time for discontent to spur the leader into a territorial diversion.

### The Main Independent Variables

The ideal indicator of the diversionary incentive, the leader's popularity rating, is either unavailable for a broad range of countries or cannot be trusted as it is subject to governmental manipulation. As a substitute, I rely on two proxy indicators of the leader's (un)popularity. The first one captures the extent to which the citizens of a country are visibly dissatisfied with their government. I sum the incidents of protests, strikes, and riots from the Cross-National Time-Series (CNTS) Archive (2005) into an index reporting the number of unrest activities in a given country in a given year.<sup>12</sup> Pickering and Kisangani (2005; Kisangani and Pickering 2007) have a similar approach. The second indicator, the economic (GDP) growth rate is typically used in the diversionary research (e.g., Hess and Orphanides 1995; James and Oneal 1991; Oneal and Tir 2006; Pickering and Kisangani 2005) because the state of the economy is seen as an important predictor of leaders' popularity (Hibbs 1987; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992). To check the robustness of my findings, I rely on two different sources for the growth rate, Gleditsch (2002), abbreviated below as KSG, and the CNTS Archive (2005).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The CNTS Archive unfortunately does not specify the location of the activities, so I am unable to distinguish between unrest taking place in the center versus periphery of a given country.

<sup>13</sup>Using the growth data from Penn World Tables (Summers et al. 1995) did not yield appreciably different results.

## Control Variables

I control for several influences that have been found to affect the likelihood of dyadic conflict. To capture countries' *relative power*, I use the Correlates of War project's combined index of military capabilities (Singer 1988) and create a measure that takes the natural logarithm of the ratio of the stronger country's capabilities to those of the weaker member of the dyad. I control for whether the dyad is *democratic* by noting whether both member states achieve a score greater than 6 on Polity IV's (Marshall and Jaggers 2002) scale. *Allies* may fight each other less because they share common security interests; I control for this with data from Gibler and Sarkees (2004). To capture the potential deterrent effects of *trade*, I divide the sum of the initiator's exports and imports with the prospective target by the initiator's GDP (all from Gleditsch 2002); the measure captures the extent to which the initiator's economy is dependent on the target. Because for most states the ability to fight is determined primarily by geographic proximity—I control for the effects of distance between the dyad members (Stinnett et al. 2002); see also note 11. Finally, diversions are thought to be the most likely right before *elections*, because this is when the leaders are the most likely to need a boost in their popularity ratings (e.g., Hess and Orphanides 1995; Smith 1996). I code upcoming elections by using the CNTS Archive (2005).

## Results and Discussion

Each Model in Table 1 employs a different combination of territorial conflict (the dependent variable) and economic growth (an independent variable) operationalizations. Starting the evaluation of H1 with the government unpopularity variable, its coefficient is consistently significant and positive in Models 1–6. The likelihood of territorial conflict initiation increases significantly as the government becomes more unpopular, and this finding is robust to all the alternate specifications of the dependent variable. With the hope of deflecting attention from domestic unrest and creating a rally effect, embattled leaders initiate territorial conflicts. By focusing on territorial diversions, my findings thus provide clear support for the detrimental effects of domestic unrest. Other than in Tir and Jasinski's (2008) work on diversion against domestic ethnic groups, findings for domestic unrest proved to be elusive in Rummel (1963) and Tanter (1966) and inconsistent in Pickering and Kisangani's (2005; see also Kisangani and

Pickering 2007) study. None of these works, however, consider the possibility of territorial diversion.

Empirical support for the economic growth rate is much weaker. The finding that poor economic performance is associated with a higher likelihood of territorial conflict initiation is significant only in Models 3–4.<sup>14</sup> The weak results are not altogether surprising given the findings from prior literature. In accordance with the insignificant relationships of Models 1–2 and 5–6, Ostrom and Job (1986), for example, note that the likelihood that a U.S. President will use force is uncertain, as the bad economy might create incentives both to divert the public's attention with a foreign adventure and to focus on solving the economic problem, thus reducing the inclination to act abroad. Similarly, Fordham (1998a, 1998b), DeRouen (1995), and Gowa (1998) find no relation between a poor economy and U.S. use of force. Furthermore, Leeds and Davis (1997) conclude that the conflict-initiating behavior of 18 industrialized democracies is unrelated to economic conditions as do Pickering and Kisangani (2005) and Russett and Oneal (2001) in global studies. In contrast and more in line with my findings of a significant relationship (in Models 3–4), Hess and Orphanides (1995), for example, argue that economic recessions are linked with forceful action by an incumbent U.S. president. Furthermore, Fordham's (2002) revision of Gowa's (1998) analysis shows some effect of a bad economy and DeRouen and Peake (2002) report that U.S. use of force diverts the public's attention from a poor economy. Among cross-national studies, Oneal and Russett (1997) report that slow growth increases the incidence of militarized disputes, as does Russett (1990)—but only for the United States; slow growth does not affect the behavior of other countries. Kisangani and Pickering (2007) report some significant associations, but they are sensitive to model specification, while Tir and Jasinski (2008) find a clearer link between economic underperformance and increased attacks on domestic ethnic minorities. While none of these works has focused on territorial diversions, my own inconsistent findings for economic growth fit well with the mixed results reported in the literature.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Because economic underperformance could motivate expressions of antigovernment sentiments, multicollinearity may be responsible for growth's insignificance in four of the Models. Yet, dropping the government unpopularity variable fails to yield significant results for economic growth.

<sup>15</sup>A few studies have found a pattern opposite to the one predicted by the diversionary argument. A well-performing economy creates additional resources that can be put toward military objectives (e.g., Goldstein 1988).

TABLE 1 Logit Analyses of Territorial Conflict Initiation

Economic Gr. Data → Independent Variable ↓	Territorial MID		Fatal Territorial MID		ICB Territorial Crisis							
	KSG Data Model 1	CNTS Data Model 2	KSG Data Model 3	CNTS Data Model 4	KSG Data Model 5	CNTS Data Model 6						
Government Unpopularity	.032** (.010)	.033** (.010)	.038** (.012)	.041** (.012)	.039** (.010)	.040** (.010)						
Economic Growth	-.164 (.348)	-.388 (.290)	-1.313* (.578)	-1.254* (.650)	-.510 (1.057)	.203 (.142)						
Power	-.265** (.051)	-.255** (.057)	-.382** (.075)	-.380** (.087)	-.183** (.070)	-.173* (.075)						
Democracy	-.092 (.278)	-.099 (.282)	.276 (.390)	.395 (.401)	-.287 (.501)	-.301 (.510)						
Alliance	-.047 (.157)	-.037 (.168)	-.222 (.190)	-.208 (.213)	-.060 (.225)	-.072 (.231)						
Trade	-108.69 (70.835)	-95.609 (67.316)	-507.08* (216.68)	-595.59* (274.66)	-197.42 (203.14)	-175.42 (194.42)						
Distance	-.445** (.078)	-.458** (.084)	-.694** (.119)	-.800** (.160)	-.653** (.122)	-.655** (.126)						
Elections	.059 (.099)	.094 (.104)	.226* (.119)	.323** (.128)	.104 (.204)	.059 (.217)						
Constant	.136 (.208)	.114 (.220)	.093 (.294)	.137 (.321)	-3.248** (.330)	-3.278** (.339)						
N Chi-square	36789	789.59**	35468	750.61	36783	436.10**	35468	449.75**	36783	109.24**	35468	107.22**

Notes: Cell entries report coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses). All significance levels are one-tailed, \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$ . MID = Militarized Interstate Dispute. ICB = International Crisis Behavior. Economic growth data sources codes are KSG = Gleditsch (2002) and CNTS = CNTS (2005). Statistics correcting for the binary time-series cross-sectional nature of the data (see Beck et al. 1998) are omitted from the table.

Hypothesis 1 thus receives strong support via the unpopularity variable but only weak support via the economic growth variable. These results suggest that embattled leaders are much more likely to respond with territorial diversions to direct signs of their unpopularity (e.g., strikes, protests, riots) than to general background conditions such as economic malaise. Presumably, protesters can be distracted via territorial diversions while fixing the economy would take a more concerted and prolonged policy effort. Bad economic conditions seem to motivate only the most serious, fatal territorial confrontations. This implies that leaders may be reserving the most high-profile and risky diversions for the times when they are the most desperate, that is when their power is threatened both by signs of discontent with their rule and by more systemic problems plaguing the country (i.e., an underperforming economy).

Next, I conduct a series of follow-up tests suggested by an anonymous Reviewer; results based on the reanalysis of Model 1 are presented in the online appendix. Evaluating the implication that territorial diversions are indeed more likely to result

from diversionary conditions than nonterritorial diversions, I set up a multinomial logit model that contrasts the initiation of territorial MID versus nonterritorial MID (base outcome). The results show a positive and statistically significant coefficient for the government unpopularity variable (first column of Table 3), meaning that higher levels of government unpopularity are more likely to produce territorial rather than nonterritorial MID. Further checks include performing rare events logit (King and Zeng 2001) and population-averaged logit analyses to verify whether the rare events nature of the dependent variable or cross-sectional characteristics of the data alter the findings, respectively. The findings for the two independent variables remain unchanged (see Table 3, columns two and three). Finally, protesting behavior in more populous countries could be considered more “normal” and less threatening to the government, potentially lowering the incentive to divert. Dividing the government unpopularity variable by the log of country’s population (from the Correlates of War National Capabilities data set, Singer 1987) reveals that the population size-standardized



government unpopularity variable remains positive and significant; see Table 3, final column.

Concerning the control variables, the effects of power and distance are consistent with expectations and across the Models in Table 1. Democracy, alliance ties, and trade coefficients have mostly the expected dampening influence on territorial conflict initiation; but only trade exhibits a significant impact and only when the dependent variable is the fatal territorial MID (i.e., in Models 3–4).<sup>16</sup> These results are somewhat surprising, but the reader is reminded that the effects of alliance are highly contested (see Maoz 2000), while the impact of trade has not been established in the domain of territorial conflict. Similarly, recent research shows that the democratic peace weakens considerably in the context of territorial conflict (James, Park, and Choi 2006) and that the democratic peace may be epiphenomenal to territorial peace (Gibler 2007).<sup>17</sup> Importantly, the control variable results imply that some of the related interests (e.g., security, regime ties) may indeed be subordinated to the territorial diversion impetus.

Revisiting the link between regime type and diversion, some scholars argue that democratic leaders have a greater motivation—due to the need for popular support—for diversion (e.g., Gelpi 1997; Russett 1990; Smith 1996). Yet, others (e.g., Downs and Rocke 1994; Miller 1995; Pickering and Kisangani 2005) assert that authoritarian leaders need popular support in order to appear legitimate. Because they cannot derive legitimacy from democratic institutions and elections, they look to diversions to help them achieve this goal. Autocrats can also divert with greater impunity due to the lack of institutional checks and balances. In follow-up tests available from the online appendix, Table 4, I restrict the set of initiator countries in Model 1 to democracies only, autocracies only, all nondemocracies, and all non-autocracies. That the findings hold suggests that both democratic and autocratic leaders value territorial diversions. Nevertheless, resolving the broader debate is beyond the scope of this study.

Returning to Table 1, the final control variable's positive coefficient means that approaching elections increase the likelihood of the use of force over

territory. Yet, the coefficient obtains significance only in Models 3 and 4, that is when fatal territorial MID is the dependent variable. This again suggests that leaders may be reserving the most serious diversions precisely for when they need help the most. The significant relationship in the two Models notwithstanding, the predominant finding of no relationship is consistent with that of other studies (e.g., Leeds and Davis 1997). Perhaps this is because there is “a permanent referendum on elected officials” (Russett 1990, 134), a phenomenon Lowi (1985) calls plebiscitary democracy. If public approval is always an important political asset, diversionary use of force could occur at any stage in the election cycle.<sup>18</sup>

Next, I calculate marginal effects for the key Models' significant variables (from Table 1), by holding each of the variables at its mean or mode value and varying the value of the focal variable by one-half standard deviation on each side of its mean or to the nonmode value. As shown in Table 2, unpopularity increases the likelihood of territorial MID, fatal territorial MID, and territorial crisis initiation by 11%, 14%, and 17%, respectively. Yet, these effects are small vis-à-vis those of power (–42%, –57%, and –25%) and distance, whose greater values nearly eliminate the probability of initiation in Models 3 and 5. Model 3 results provide insights about the relative importance of the state of the economy (–14%) and approaching elections (+14%). A theoretical worst-case scenario (unrest, bad economy, approaching elections) would increase the likelihood of fatal confrontations by about 42%. The moderate impacts of the diversionary variables are consistent with the diversionary theory, as it claims to explain only some armed conflicts. We would also not expect diversionary motives to alter the nature of international politics so fundamentally that effects of relative power and distance would be negated.

In sum, the several tests of H1 show much support for it via the government unpopularity variable. Support via the economic performance variable is weak and inconsistent, though the related findings are the strongest when the initiation of fatal territorial MIDs is analyzed. This pattern repeats itself with the trade and elections control variables, suggesting that the closest empirical fit for the territorial diversion argument can be found in the initiation of fatal disputes.

<sup>16</sup>Few surprises are revealed in the online appendix tables. The findings for power and distance variables continue to be negative and significant, while they are mixed for alliances and trade, and insignificant for the regime type.

<sup>17</sup>Because the inclusion of multiple liberal variables could be creating multicollinearity, in follow-up tests I excluded various combinations of these variables. Yet, only the trade variable became significant.

<sup>18</sup>Contrary to the diversionary argument, Gaubatz (1999) and Huth and Allee (2002) argue that force is likely to be used after elections, that is when leaders are most insulated from potential use of force failures.

**TABLE 2 Marginal Effects for Statistically Significant Variables**

Independent Variable	Territorial MID	Fatal Territorial MID	ICB Territorial Crisis
	Model 1	Model 3	Model 5
Government Unpopularity	+11%	+14%	+17%
Economic Growth		-14%	
Power	-42%	-57%	-25%
Trade		-46%	
Distance	-78%	-98%	-98%
Elections		+14%	

*Notes:* Cell entries report marginal effects for significant variables based on select Models from Table 1.

Finally, I briefly turn to the strategic interaction argument advanced by Smith (1996, 149), who argues that diversion-related domestic problems make a leader not only a willing initiator but also a problematic target. Precisely because an embattled leader is motivated to divert, they would welcome being attacked, much like Margaret Thatcher welcomed the invasion of the Falkland Islands. The attack would give the target's leader a credible excuse to fight back and thus increase their own popularity. This would in turn increase the danger of conflict escalation and protraction for the initiating leader, who would therefore be better off targeting a country whose leader is not experiencing domestic problems. If Smith is correct, one should observe a drop in the likelihood of a country experiencing domestic problems being targeted.<sup>19</sup> In a preliminary set of tests available from the online appendix, Table 5, I add to the key Models from Table 1 the government unpopularity index and economic growth variables for the prospective target countries. The results do not, however, bear out Smith's (1996) expectation of deterrent effects of diversionary pressure within the prospective target countries. The target's economic

<sup>19</sup>While Leeds and Davis (1997) find that problematic domestic conditions reduce the chances that developed countries are targeted and Clark (2003) reports evidence of strategic interaction in U.S. diversionary behavior, others have not found clear support for strategic interaction. For example, Oneal and Tir (2006) find no support, Chiozza and Goemans (2004) find only "qualified support" for their modified version of the argument focusing on target countries only, and Kisangani and Pickering's (2007) results are inconsistent.

growth rate is insignificant while the target's government unpopularity actually seems to invite territorial aggression.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Earlier diversionary works may have underspecified the inner workings of the diversionary theoretical mechanism, by neglecting to consider that the leader anticipates that the population may react to territorial issues in ways that are more consistent with the diversionary expectations. Finding empirical support for my territorial diversion argument not only shows that it has merit but also that the diversionary theory has broad applicability that goes beyond the "usual suspects" cases such as the United States or Israel; this has seldom been demonstrated in the earlier works. Finally, and unfortunately, my findings indicate that some international conflicts may indeed be motivated by very narrow, personal interests.

This study points to at least two main directions for future research. First, do territorial diversions actually cause the anticipated rally effects? Investigating this would allow for the assessment of the effectiveness of territorial diversions and is a topic Chiozza and Goemans (2003, 2004) investigate in the context of leader survival. Second, forthcoming research should integrate the full scope of options available to an unpopular leader, such as territorial diversion, diversion over other issues, repression, implementation of policies to address the underlying grievances, resignation from office, doing nothing, etc. The decision mechanisms by which one option chosen over another suggest a broader research agenda.

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<sup>20</sup>Admittedly, this is only a simple test of strategic interaction. A more sophisticated test would link the initiator-target interaction with the leader survival prospects in both countries via multiple simultaneous equations (see Chiozza and Goemans 2004).

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