

Land Grabs: Causes, Consequences, and the Evolution of Territorial Conquest

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ABSTRACT

Territorial conquest once went hand in hand with warfare, but no longer. In aggregate, conquest has declined dramatically. Yet, as Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea evinces, a particular form of conquest – land grabs seizing only a limited part of another state's territory – continues to occur. Using newly-compiled data on 105 land grabs since 1918, this article explores the conditions under which land grabs are likely to occur and likely to lead to war. Conceptualizing land grabs as the crisis tactic of the fait accompli, the article develops a theory explaining why 'gray areas' apart from core territory are especially vulnerable to them. I find that states can more often seize gray areas without provoking war and, consequently, are more likely to seize them. These results contribute to understanding the evolution of territorial conquest. Attempts to conquer entire states declined immediately after 1945. Land grabs seizing pieces of core territory, which frequently provoke wars, persisted before declining in the 1980s. Land grabs seizing gray areas – places like the Spratly and Senkaku Islands – continue to this day and are now the modern form of territorial conquest. These land grabs often provoke crises but only rarely lead to war.

Territorial conquest has declined dramatically since 1945. Yet, as 2014 Russia's occupation and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula evinces, a particular form of conquest – the land grab – continues to occur. These land grabs are not conquests of entire countries, a rare occurrence since the end of the Second World War, but rather more limited military operations to take a piece of another state's territory. Even when no land grab takes place, the threat of one exerts a strong influence on events. Alarmed by events in Ukraine, NATO has begun to increase its presence in the Baltic in order to deter a similar land grab taking, for instance, the Estonian town of Narva (Freeman 2015). In Asia, recent tensions over the Spratly and Senkaku Islands came and went without any land grabs,¹ yet the possibility of one ranks among the most likely crisis scenarios going forward, imperiling regional security. None of this is new. Fears of a Soviet land grab in Berlin were a defining feature of the Cold War. All told, 105

¹ However, China has used reclaimed land to enlarge islands (Watkins 2016).

land grabs have occurred since 1918, spread across the world from the Falklands to the Himalayas. Since 1945, the land grab has been the predominant form of territorial conquest.

Using newly-compiled data on land grabs, this article explores two questions about them in order to lay the foundation for a revised understanding of the evolution of territorial conquest. First, why do long grabs occur in some cases but not others? Second, why do some land grabs provoke war while others do not? Drawing on existing literature, I consider two sets of answers. First, I assess explanations from the territorial conflict literature grounded in the value of the disputed territory – population, resources, strategic location, and ethnic identity.² Second, I examine explanatory variables from the general literature on interstate conflict: power levels, nuclear deterrence, and regime type. Among these variables, only two produce significant results: 1) Democratic challengers pitted against authoritarian defenders more often commit land grabs during interstate crises over territory. 2) Land grabs seizing more populous territories more often lead to war. On the whole, both sets of candidate explanations fare surprisingly poorly at predicting land grabs.

Therefore, I introduce a third perspective on the question. To explain land grabs, this article starts from the premise that each land grab is best conceived as a *fait accompli*. As a result, what is needed – and what this article develops – is a theory of *faits accomplis* as a crisis tactic applied to the issue of disputed territory.³ Rather than approaching conquests as decisions to start wars, I show how conquests have increasingly become attempts to get away with seizing territory while avoiding war. In that regard, the article contributes to a nascent body of research on the importance of the *fait accompli* in international politics, in particular during interstate crises (Altman 2015; Altman 2016; Tarar 2016).

To test the theory, the article first presents a statistical analysis of interstate crises over territory from 1918 to 2007. I find that land grabs are more likely to occur in crises over gray area territories in comparison to crises over core territory after controlling for several dimensions of territorial value. In contrast, land grabs seizing even small pieces of core territory are surprisingly rare. Then, in a statistical analysis of all land grabs from 1918 to 2015, I show that land grabs striking gray areas led to war less

² (Carter 2010; Diehl and Goertz 2002:15-21; Hensel et al. 2008; Huth 1996; Huth and Allee 2002; Tir and Vazquez 2012; Wiegand 2011).

³ This theory builds on insights from the work of Thomas Schelling (1960; 1966).

often than land grabs seizing pieces of core territory. States find it difficult to “get away” with a land grab unless the territory is a gray area.

The decline in territorial conquest since 1945, usually attributed to a strengthening norm of territorial integrity, has been well documented (Zacher 2001; Fazal 2011; Atzili 2012). However, beneath this aggregate trend is a more nuanced history. As striking as the quantitative decline in the number of conquests is the qualitative change in the nature of conquest. Territorial conquests have not gone away entirely, but rather they have become smaller, more targeted, and less violent. Dividing conquests into three types brings a different and more complete picture to light. First, attempts to take over entire countries declined abruptly after 1945. Second, land grabs seizing core territory persisted until the early 1980s before these too declined sharply. Since then, interstate wars over territory have been rare. However, third, land grabs seizing gray areas have continued even after other forms of conquest declined.

Land grabs seizing gray areas were common long before the 1980s; more than 60 percent of land grabs since 1918 struck these specific types of territories. But, since the early 1980s, all but a few land grabs have done so, making land grabs seizing gray areas the modern form of territorial conquest. Conquest once went hand in hand with warfare, but in recent years conquest has consisted instead of attempts to take gray areas by *fait accompli*, grabbing land while avoiding war.

The article proceeds as follows: The first section defines land grabs and conceptualizes them as *faits accomplis*. The second reviews existing explanations for land grabs. The third develops a theory of land grabs that underscores the role of territorial gray areas. The fourth describes the research design. The fifth explores the conditions under which land grabs have been likely to occur. The sixth examines the conditions under which land grabs have been likely to lead to war. I conclude by explaining why the specific phenomenon isolated in this article – land grabs seizing gray area territories – is likely to be the predominant form of territorial conquest in the 21st century, as it has been for several decades.

Land Grabs as Faits Accomplis

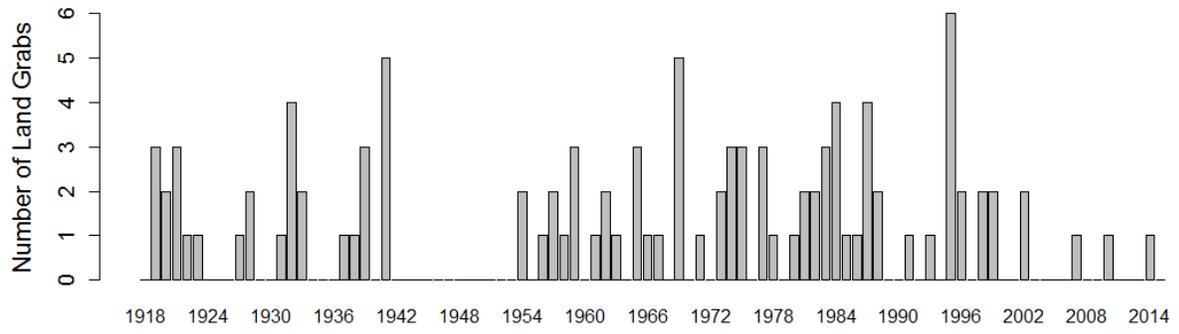
A land grab occurs when one state uses its military to unilaterally seize a disputed piece of territory from another with the intention to assume control of that territory. I exclude all attempts to

conquer and absorb the entire territory of another state. Observing that challengers generally either aim to conquer either a small piece of a defender's territory or all of it, my assumption is that these are two distinct phenomena likely to have different explanations.⁴ Attempting to conquer another state usually implies a decision to initiate a war. A land grab taking only a small piece of territory is something different. This is why the concept of the *fait accompli* will be so useful; *faits accomplis* aim to take something small enough that the perpetrator can get away with the gain without provoking a wider war.

Figure 1 presents the number of land grabs in each year from 1918 to 2015. A later section provides more detail on the data. The appendix contains basic information about each land grab. Across the period, land grabs have been a persistent feature of interstate conflict.

⁴ Attempt to acquire, for instance, half of another state's territory are quite rare. Once the stakes are high enough that the defender will resist to the limits of its abilities, there is little reason to curtail aims.

Figure 1: Land Grabs, 1918-2015



A *fait accompli* is defined as imposing a limited unilateral gain at an adversary's expense in an attempt to get away with that gain when the adversary chooses to relent rather than escalate in retaliation.⁵ Each *fait accompli* is a calculated risk. Whether a *fait accompli* results in a successful gain or escalation depends on whether the state employing it has successfully gauged the level of loss the adversary will accept before war becomes preferable to capitulation. The strategy targets a gain small enough that the defender will let it go rather than escalate. Sometimes this succeeds, as with Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and China's seizure of the Paracel Islands in 1974. Other *faits accomplis* fail when they provoke a stronger response than had been hoped. Pakistan's 1999 infiltration of forces to occupy positions on India's side of the Line of Control in the Kargil district of Kashmir backfired when it provoked a strong military response retaking the lost territory. Argentina's seizure of the Falkland Islands failed along similar lines.

Until recently, the most significant discussion of the *fait accompli* came in the form of the longstanding assumption in the causes of war literature that it is a risky crisis tactic that exacerbates the likelihood of war (Snyder and Diesing 1977:227; Stern et al. 1989:20; Van Evera 1998:10). Van Evera, for instance, characterizes the *fait accompli* as a "halfway step to war." George and Smoke (1974:536-40) identify *faits accomplis* as a unique form of partial deterrence failure, worse for the deterrer than maintaining the status quo but better than an unlimited attack. Formalizing the concept, Tarar (2016) introduces the *fait accompli* into established bargaining models of war.

Although offering an important starting point, this literature does not explain the observable conditions under which *faits accomplis* – and, by extension, land grabs – are more likely to occur. Nor does it fully explore the conditions under which land grabs are more likely to lead to war.

Existing Explanations for Land Grabs

⁵ "Limited" does not mean unimportant, but rather only that the *fait accompli* does not aim to conquer the defender outright or change the regime. "Unilateral" means that the defender does not consent to the change in the status quo (for instance, by capitulating to a coercive threat). That change is instead imposed upon the defender. For similar definitions, see Schelling (1966:44-5); Snyder and Diesing (1977:227).

The question of the causes of land grabs is inseparably linked to the question of their consequences, because a challenger is more likely to opt for a land grab when conditions dictate that a more favorable outcome – or, at least, the avoidance of a costly war – is more likely. Therefore, this article considers these two questions in tandem. Past research provides two overarching sets of explanations for why challengers might be able to get away with land grabs, one drawing on explanations for territorial conflict and the other from general explanations for interstate conflict.

The concept of the *fait accompli* implies the first piece of the answer to the question of when and where *faits accomplis* are likely to occur. This answer: when the stakes being seized are of low enough value to the defender that the challenger has a sufficiently high probability of avoiding war.

This focus on the value of the stakes accords with the favored explanatory variables in the territorial conflict literature, which has extensively surveyed the role of different aspects of a territory's value (or "salience") on the likelihood of militarized disputes and wars. In their landmark studies of territorial disputes, Huth and Allee break down territorial value into three categories: economic, strategic, and ethnic (Huth 1996; Huth and Allee 2002). More recently, the ICOW project's investigation of territorial claims (Hensel et al. 2008) reaffirms these explanatory variables while adding more, most importantly population. Whereas Huth and Allee approach economic value largely in terms of the presence of natural resources, population is more germane for regions where most economic activity does not consist of resource extraction.⁶ Population, of course, also has intrinsic value. Ethnic value captures one dimension of this, in particular capturing the *irredentist* motive to bring ethnic kin currently isolated across a border into the fold. Strategic value comes in several forms, encompassing proximity to major shipping lanes, the presence of military bases, location astride an invasion route, and whether that territory determines a claimant's access to the sea.⁷ It is reasonable to suppose that more valuable territories are more likely to lead to war if seized and, therefore, less likely to be seized.

⁶ Wiegand 2011 offers a more nuanced theory of the role of population.

⁷ ICOW introduces two additional dimensions of territory value: whether there is a historical basis for a territorial claim and whether the disputed territory is claimed as part of the "homeland." I exclude the historical basis variable on the grounds that it does not capture an aspect of the territory's intrinsic value in the same way as the others (it is, in any case, insignificant for both dependent variables). It was my original intent to include the "homeland" variable and examine its relationship with gray areas. However, the disputed territory is

The second set of candidate explanations for land grabs consists of the canonical explanatory variables for interstate conflict, most importantly power levels and regime type. With Russia's annexation of Crimea as an example, it is plausible to suspect that strong states either 1) commit more land grabs or 2) do so specifically against weaker states. Weak states, correspondingly, might be frequent victims of land grabs (Mearsheimer 2001). Because I focus on the ability of defenders to deter land grabs, I also examine whether the possession of nuclear weapons – the form of military power most associated with deterrence – can augment this particular form of deterrence (Sagan and Waltz 2013). The literature on democracy and conflict provides a clear basis on which to predict that democracies may be less likely to commit land grabs, especially against other democracies. When a land grab does occur between democracies, it might be less likely to escalate to war (Oneal and Russett 1997; but see Gibler 2007).

Despite their importance for explaining conflict in general, however, these variables – power, nuclear weapons, and democracy – fare surprisingly poorly at predicting land grabs. Similarly, existing measures of the value of territories struggle to predict land grabs. Using the low value of small pieces of territory to explain land grabs also suffers from a more conceptual problem. Every large disputed territory consists of small pieces. If any particular territory is too valuable to seize, why not merely occupy a small enough part of it? From that standpoint, small size (low value) is as much a constant as a variable. Yet few small territories are seized. The question, then, is why land grabs seize some small territories but not others. Value alone cannot provide the answer. The next section takes up this question.

The Importance of Territorial Gray Areas

The threat of the *fait accompli*, and specifically of the land grab, is one of the fundamental challenges for states attempting to deter aggression, because deterrence is not an all or nothing enterprise. States must deter outright invasion and conquest, but they also must deter more limited predations. When an adversary seizes a small piece of territory, states confront a difficult decision

claimed as part of the homeland for the challenger in all but three observations, all but seven for the defender, rendering this variable unhelpful in explaining variation.

regarding the nature and extent of their response. How would India respond if Pakistani soldiers were to tomorrow seize a small part of Kashmir? How would Japan respond if China seizes islands in the East China Sea? How would NATO have responded if the Soviet Union seized West Berlin? These are difficult questions. The piece of territory may be too small to justify a war, but relenting to the loss of the territory is hardly an appealing option. If the first land grab is allowed to pass, how would a defender then prevent being picked apart piece by piece with 'salami tactics'? These tactics entail slicing off the objective piece by piece in small increments (Schelling 1966:66-77). This problem is quite general. All states have many small interests to protect, including numerous pieces of territory. Making credible the threat to retaliate is essential for deterrence, but it is not an easy task when the stakes are so limited.

To manage the problem of protecting so many small pieces of territory, states must set a deterrent red line that encapsulates these pieces into one larger whole worth enough that they can more credibly threaten to fight to defend it.⁸ In territorial conflicts, borders normally serve this role. If the challenger is allowed to cross a border without starting a war, then the barrier to further predation loses credibility even if the initial invasion only occupied a small region.⁹ If a defender were to allow violations of the line to go uncontested, how could the next red line be credible? Because the defender would be in dire straits after abandoning the initial line at the border, the defender can more credibly threaten to fight to defend it. The critical question is, as Schelling (1966:159) put it, "If not here, where?" In general, defenders must fight for even small pieces of their territory in order to protect the rest.

Except for gray areas. Gray areas regions that are not clearly a part of the territorial core and so can be sacrificed without compromising the protection of that core. If a state loses an island in a waterway between it and a rival, the waterway remains intact as the natural line that the challenger will be reluctant to cross. Similarly, losing territory in an un-demarcated border area is different from losing territory that is clearly on the defender's side of an established border. Although the term "gray area" associates more naturally with ambiguities than islands, I use it to encompass both. To expand on the

⁸ Following Altman and Miller (2016), I define a red line as the part of a coercive (deterrent) demand that distinguishes compliance from violation.

⁹ This argument is akin to the claim that states confronting multiple separatist rebel groups cannot afford to concede to one for fear of damaging their reputation with others (Walter 2009).

metaphor, if the defender's territorial core is "black" (forbidden) and the challenger's own territory is "white," gray areas lie in between. These gray areas are vulnerable to land grabs.

Conversely, deterrence against land grabs is strongest when the red line is unmistakably precise and set on a natural underlying line (a focal point) like a major waterway or an established border. These focal points are unique and conspicuous salencies that are clearly different from nearby alternatives (Schelling 1960:53-67). In territorial conflicts, physical and political geography provide these focal points in the forms of major waterways and established borders, respectively. The broader theoretical argument at work is that these focal points anchor deterrence against small and incremental *faits accomplis* (Altman 2015).

Territorial gray areas come in four varieties. First, a gray area exists when two focal points leave a small area in between them. River islands fit this description. Each channel of the river is a focal point. The line against invasion across the river is stark, but what of islands in its midst? Damansky (Zhenbao) Island, for instance, figured prominently in the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969. River islands are gray areas not due to ambiguity per se, but instead due to their awkward separateness from the territorial core. Second, a gray area exists when a small area falls outside the salient focal point. Vietnam's deterrent red lines against Chinese occupation of features in the Spratly Islands offer an example. For Vietnam, enduring a land grab in the Spratlys without escalating in retaliation would inflict less damage on the credibility of the deterrent red line protecting its core territory than would acceding to the loss of a small area along the land border with China. Third, a gray area exists when the focal point (the established border) is imprecisely defined with respect to a particular area. Fourth, a gray area exists when a state is imprecise about its territorial claims in its public declarations. I have found this fourth possibility to be rare in territorial crises, unlike the third.¹⁰ The following example illustrates the distinction.

The Simla Agreement ending the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War established the Line of Control dividing Kashmir. However, the negotiators left a gray area at the northern end, an inhospitable mountainous region centered on the Siachen Glacier with no significant economic value. The agreement read, "Thence north to the glaciers." This phrasing turned out to be amenable to competing

¹⁰ Crises tend to arise only after states make conflicting territorial claims.

interpretations, notably straight north versus a continuation of the northeasterly direction of the border up to that point. The result was a triangular gray area bounded by these two interpretations and the Chinese border. By the 1980s, the temptation to score a political victory in Siachen had grown stronger. Both sides articulated unambiguous claims to the region, but the ambiguity in the border itself remained. Reacting to intelligence reports of an imminent Pakistani land grab seizing Siachen, India moved first. The Indian Army advanced rapidly by helicopter and established military posts on the mountain peaks on the far side of the glacier before Pakistani forces could react. The result was a series of small battles, but India retained control of the disputed region. Pakistan forwent any immediate escalation elsewhere (Raghavan 2002). India's *fait accompli* succeeded in seizing the gray area.

Although Schelling laid the foundation for thinking about the importance of focal points in interstate conflicts, several recent studies share this emphasis. Gibling (2007: 517-21) identifies focal points as a key determinant of border strength, emphasizing in particular rivers and radical changes in terrain type (such as flatlands to mountains).¹¹ Vazquez (1995:288) similarly argues for the importance of rivers and other clear geographic salients because they provide natural lines for borders that help to prevent territorial disputes. Carter and Goemans (2011) find that new borders tend to form based on pre-existing administrative boundaries because these boundaries provide a focal point that enables bargains. Griffiths (2015) finds that secessionist movements are more likely to succeed when the region in question has a unique administrative architecture that differs from other political subunits of the state. Like gray areas, such regions can be regarded as exceptional and sacrificed with less damage to the credibility of the commitment to retain other areas. Huth et al. (2011; 2012) find that international legal principles and agreements provide focal points that increase the rate at which territorial conflicts get resolved. Fortna (2003:343-57; 2004:22-3) makes the case for precise agreements that also provide "a focal point that can help prevent 'salami tactic' attempts to push the line to either side's advantage." She emphasizes the utility of demilitarized zones in establishing such focal points. Whereas most of this literature has focused on the value of focal points in enabling durable bargains, I argue that this logic

¹¹ Gibling further argues that shared colonial heritage is a predictor of low border strength because colonial powers were especially unlikely to carefully delineate boundaries within their empire (whereas these powers more often delineated borders with rival empires). This study largely endorses Gibling's conception of border strength. Note, however, that rivers are a two-edged sword. Although rivers provide focal points, they also create gray areas in the form of river islands.

extends to the role of gray areas in undermining them by enabling *faits accomplis*. Gray areas function, in effect, as the antithesis of focal points.

This reasoning sums to a theory explaining why territorial gray areas leave openings for land grabs. Two primary hypotheses emerge out of this theory. Gray areas make land grabs more likely to occur (H1) by making them less likely to provoke war (H2). Through targeting gray areas, land grabs are better able to make gains while avoiding war than land grabs targeting core territory.

H1: A land grab is more likely to occur if the disputed territory is a gray area.

H2: A land grab is less likely to lead to war if the seized territory is a gray area.

Taking the two hypotheses together, the expectation is that gray areas make land grabs more likely to take place but less likely to escalate to war if they do take place. Consequently, gray areas increase the likelihood of war through one mechanism (more land grabs) but reduce it through another (lower probability of escalation per land grab). The net effect of gray areas on the likelihood of war depends on which of these mechanisms predominates.

Research Design

To test this theory against existing explanations for land grabs, the article presents a statistical analysis divided into two parts. The first explores the causes of land grabs in interstate crises over territory from 1918 to 2007. Land grabs are the dependent variable. Of the 131 states at risk of land grabs (defenders) in 95 interstate crises over territory, land grabs strike 65 (50%), an indication that territorial disputes very often reach crisis status due to a land grab. Gray areas occur in 64 cases (49%). This high incidence of gray areas may indicate that crises are more likely to break out over territorial gray areas than other disputed and disputable border areas.

The subsequent section assesses the consequences of land grabs by examining the conditions under which land grabs have been more likely to lead to war. This analysis includes the full set of all 105 land grabs from 1918 to 2015, including the nineteen that did not occur during an ICB-defined crisis (see below). War is the dependent variable.

Before proceeding to the results, this section summarizes the decisions made regarding the scope, definitions, and measurement of the data. I consider in turn interstate crises over territory, land grabs, gray areas, and the set of control variables used to operationalize alternative explanations.¹²

Interstate Crises over Territory

To examine the causes of land grabs, I utilize the Interstate Crisis Behavior dataset as a universe of crises and crisis actors. The ICB project defines a crisis as existing for a state when its highest level decision-makers perceive all three of the following: “a threat to one or more basic values, an awareness of finite time for response to the value threat, and a heightened probability of involvement in military hostilities” (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997:3). The unit of analysis is the crisis actor: one state involved in one crisis. I examine only crises over disputed territory.¹³ As noted previously, I exclude all cases like Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait where the disputed territory was the entire territory of a state.¹⁴

The analysis is arranged to explain whether or not each crisis actor is struck by a land grab. The focus, therefore, is on defenders at risk of losing territory to a challenger’s land grab; all other ICB crisis actors are omitted.¹⁵ The data do nonetheless include whether each crisis actor commits a land grab.

¹² Where it was possible to code variables using an Interstate Crisis Behavior (ICB) case summary, I did so. Where it was not, and where the case fell outside an ICB crisis, I consulted additional secondary sources.

¹³ Both ICB variables distinguishing territorial crises are too broad for this analysis, including, for instance, cases of support for separatist rebels and disputes over freedom of navigation at sea. Consequently, I coded each ICB crisis for whether the primary issue was territory, defined as the political and military control of land involving potential change to an international border. Because I include ICOW territorial claims data in most of the models below, only cases where an ICOW-recognized territorial claim existed are used in those models. This amounts to all but a few of the cases that were coded as territorial.

¹⁴ I exclude cases in which a coalition occupies the full territory of a state but one or more members of the coalition receive only a smaller piece.

¹⁵ The choice of defenders over challengers is due to the fact that the ICB actor-level data omits some aggressors on the grounds that they did not view a particular confrontation as sufficiently threatening.

A disputed territory can enter a crisis occupied by a state, occupied by that state's adversary, or unoccupied. I exclude states that cannot be victims of land grabs because their adversary already occupies the territory immediately prior to the crisis. However, the results are robust to including such states. Some challengers are in fact the victims of what I refer to as retaliatory land grabs, which occur when the initial defender retakes territory that the challenger has just seized. Of the 105 land grabs since 1918 (including the minority falling outside the confines of an ICB crisis), 28 were retaliatory, with all but a few retaking the exact territory that had just been seized.

Although not the only possible scope for the study, interstate crises offer several advantages over possible alternatives. First, the *fait accompli* is regarded as a crisis tactic, and defining the scope accordingly facilitates one purpose of the study, which is to contribute to understanding *faits accomplis*. Second, the ICB dataset is more transparent than alternative options (in particular, militarized interstate disputes), because it includes descriptive case summaries for every observation. This allows for greater confidence in measurement and facilitated the addition of new data to existing observations. Third, although it is possible to run a similar study using existing datasets on territorial disputes or territorial claims (Hensel et al. 2008; Huth and Allee 2002), either option would likely result in a bias against detecting the impact of border ambiguities.¹⁶ The choice of interstate crises results in a much smaller sample than the alternatives would provide, but it does so by including the most pertinent cases while largely omitting noisier observations and territorial disputes that were never likely to lead to land grabs.¹⁷

Land Grabs

¹⁶ I suspect that these datasets include most instances of border ambiguities, even those featuring no significant tensions or militarized disputes. In contrast, cases with similarly low levels of tension but no ambiguity in the border are more often omitted. The result is a set of observations rich in gray areas without land grabs but light in otherwise comparable pieces of core territory without land grabs. Crises, by selecting on a level of tension rather than (in part) the existence of an ambiguity avoid this bias.

¹⁷ Although studies of crises often suffer from selection effects, an issue to which I return, there is no clear basis for concluding these problems would be any less severe for MIDs, territorial disputes, or territorial claims. On the inferential challenges of studying crises see Fearon (1994) and Fearon (2002).

A land grab, as noted above, occurs when one state uses its military to unilaterally seize a disputed piece of territory from another with the intention to assume control of that territory.¹⁸ This definition of land grab excludes the majority of cross-border military operations because they lack the intention to assume control of territory, i.e., to change the border. Incursions that are not land grabs include interventions in civil wars, raids on rebel bases, peacekeeping missions, and navigation errors by military patrols.¹⁹

Land grabs are a form of behavior, not an outcome. To qualify as a land grab, the challenger must occupy disputed territory that it did not previously hold, but there is no minimum time for which the challenger must retain the territory. The final outcome – whether the challenger keeps lasting control of the territory – does not factor into the definition. Similarly, some land grabs lead to war while others do not.²⁰ Many land grabs seize territory occupied by the armed forces of another state; others seize unoccupied territories claimed by both sides. In part for this reason, some land grabs use violence from the start, but other land grabs have acquired territory without casualties.

To identify land grabs between 1918 and 2015, I made use of several event and territorial conflict datasets, primarily the Interstate Crisis Behavior, Militarized Interstate Disputes, Correlates of War, and Territorial Change datasets, along with a variety of other sources.²¹ Because it is infeasible to identify cases in which states occupy small territories without any public controversy or complaint, the aim is to encompass all land grabs associated with a dispute, crisis, or war. Although most land grabs

¹⁸ I do not count land grabs or weight them by the size of the territory seized. I do not distinguish, for instance, between seizing one island and seizing a group of islands provided that these seizures occur within the same crisis or militarized dispute.

¹⁹ It was not possible to apply the definition of land grabs to cases taking place during state formation processes. When no prior border exists, it is infeasible to identify land grabs (or gray areas in it). The omitted cases cluster in a few transitional periods: former Ottoman Empire 1910s, former Austria-Hungary 1910s, Israel-Palestine 1940s, India-Pakistan 1940s, and Balkans 1990s.

²⁰ I include land grabs that initiate wars, but not land grabs that occur after war is underway.

²¹ (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997; Diehl and Goertz 2002; Jones et al. 1996; Sarkees et al. 2010). I would like to thank Ken Schultz for providing case narratives on territorial MID. I also made more limited use of ICOW Territorial Claims data (Hensel et al. 2008) and Huth and Allee (2002) Territorial Dispute data.

took place during an ICB crisis, I gathered data on all land grabs irrespective of that criterion. Consult the appendix for the full list.

Why new data? The Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) dataset and the Territorial Change dataset contain variables that come closest to identifying land grabs, but neither can be used to generate a list of land grabs.²² The MID dataset includes the “highest action” (in terms of escalation) taken by each actor during the dispute. Although the 14th level of this variable is “occupation of territory,” cases only enter this category when no higher escalation occurs. Any case that escalates to, for instance, “attack” (level 17), “clash” (level 18) or war (levels 20 and 21) is not coded as an occupation of territory. This leaves out many land grabs.²³ Moreover, the majority of MID “occupations of territory” are not land grabs, because a cross-border incursion for any purpose qualifies. Similarly, the Territorial Change dataset includes land grabs in three of its seven categories: “conquest,” “annexation,” and (more rarely) “cession.” Each category contains many events other than land grabs, including coerced cessions, legal settlements, and negotiated compromises. Because neither dataset was designed to specifically identify land grabs, new data are required.²⁴ Existing studies of territorial conflict often remark upon the importance of land grabs when discussing their results and cases, but until now the data to evaluate this phenomenon directly have not existed.

Gray Areas: Islands and Border Ambiguities

Approximately half of the gray areas in the data are islands, the other half ambiguities in land borders (see the Appendix for more detail). The island cases include islands at sea, river islands, and islands in large lakes. Island-like peninsulas are also included because they feature the same unmistakable physical geographic separateness from the territorial core. Although the propensities of

²² Although ICOW (Territorial Claims) includes “military conquest/occupation” as a mode of resolution of territorial claims, this category contains few land grabs because land grabs rarely result in the immediate termination of territorial claims; they more often create new claims to undo the land grab (Hensel et al. 2008).

²³ Zacher (2001) provides a list of “interstate territorial aggressions,” but it leaves out many land grabs because it selects on violence.

²⁴ Both codebooks and datasets are available from the Correlates of War webpage. Also see Diehl and Goertz (2002:53-4).

islands and ill-defined borders to promote territorial conflict do not come as surprises,²⁵ these specific relationships to land grabs have not previously been recognized.

Gray areas also take the form of ambiguities in interstate land borders. These ambiguities occur due to either inadequate delimitation (lack of agreement on paper) or inadequate demarcation (lack of agreement on the ground as to how the broader agreement on paper applies to actual border markers). Ambiguities arise when prior treaties or maps are vague with respect to a particular region or are inconsistent with respect to the boundary's location. Vagueness often results from the use of words instead of maps. Inconsistencies come about not when the two claimants draw differing lines, but rather when the same actor or actors – usually the prior colonial power or powers – drew the same boundary differently on separate occasions. Most ambiguities exist in regions where the differences in possible interpretations seemed unimportant at the time but became more so in later years. To reduce potential endogeneity, an ambiguity must predate the crisis by at least a decade. Most border ambiguities existed for many decades before the crises under examination due to their origins in the colonial era.

Disputed borders – even ill-conceived colonial borders drawn with little regard for local demographics – are not in themselves ambiguous. All of the borders in the data were disputed, but only some were ambiguous. In the Siachen example discussed previously, for instance, all of Kashmir was disputed, but the land grab seized only the gray area within that larger disputed region. Some of history's most deeply resented borders were nonetheless precisely drawn and, I argue, less prone to land grabs because of it. France abhorred the inclusion of Alsace and Lorraine in Germany following the Franco-Prussian War, but German sovereignty over those territories was unambiguous. Similarly, Somalia never accepted the line serving as its border with Ethiopia, but the line was clearly-drawn nonetheless. This distinction between an ambiguous border and a disputed border is essential in reducing the potential endogeneity problem that states might emphasize or invent ambiguities when they wish to legitimize their claim to a desired piece of territory. I return to this potential problem in a later section.

²⁵ (Fravel 2008; Gibler 2007:519-20; Hensel et al. 2008:130; Huth 1996:20-6; Wiegand 2011).

I do not include in the *gray area* variable or in the study cases of rarer types of gray areas. These include territorial enclaves, specifically West Berlin and overseas colonies like Goa (for Portugal), Western Sahara (for Spain), and West Irian (for the Netherlands). I omit both because military indefensibility offers a powerful alternative explanation for why land grabs might be more common in these cases.²⁶ These are sets of cases in which the adversary tends to have far greater military access to the disputed territory than the defender due to proximity and adjacency. Islands and ambiguous regions in land borders, in contrast, provide no consistent military advantage to challengers over defenders; the advantage varies from case to case. There are only a handful of enclave and colony cases among territorial crises since 1918. The results are similar after including them as gray areas.

Alternative Explanations (Control Variables)

The first set of control variables represents alternative explanations from the general literature on interstate conflict: power status, possession of nuclear weapons, and regime type. Data for these variables come from the ICB project and include values for each defender, each challenger, and an interaction between them. Where necessary, I filled gaps by collecting missing data in accordance with ICB criteria.²⁷ Power status has four levels: small power (1), middle power (2), great power (3), and superpower (4). The interaction term indicates whether both are great powers, including superpowers. Due to the rarity of territorial crises involving nuclear powers, I include only a control variable for whether or not the defender has nuclear weapons.²⁸ The regime type variable records whether each side is a democracy or a dictatorship in a dichotomous variable.²⁹ An interaction term marks cases of joint democracy.

To examine the value of disputed territories, I utilize ICOW data on resources, population, strategic location, and (ethnic) identity motives (Hensel et al. 2008). Natural resources include rich fishing grounds and seabed minerals around islands. A territory is assessed to have resource value “if it

²⁶ I also omit a third type, neutral and demilitarized zones, affecting only the case of Turkey in 1922 (Chanak).

²⁷ I consulted surrounding or similar ICB observations and, where needed, also drew on Polity scores (Marshall and Jaggers 2002).

²⁸ Including additional nuclear controls creates multicollinearity for several models.

²⁹ The ICB dataset divides states into five categories: 1) democratic, 2) civil authoritarian, 3) military-direct rule, 4) military-indirect rule, military-dual authority. I recode the four variants of autocracy as dictatorships.

is known or believed to include potentially valuable resources such as oil, copper, iron ore, nickel, uranium, fresh water, or fisheries.” The population variable takes on a value of (0) if there is no permanent population, (1) if only villages are present, and (2) if at least one city of 100,000 or more. Regarding strategic value, “A location can be considered strategic for either military or economic reasons, ranging from important defensive positions or military bases to communication or trade routes, a route to the sea, or a warm water port.” Finally, the identity motive variable captures ethnic, religious, and linguistic commonalities with the population of the disputed territory (Hensel and Mitchell 2005). I supplement these with Huth and Allee (2002) data on the strategic, economic, and ethnic value of disputed territories.

The Causes of Land Grabs

Under what conditions have land grabs been more likely to occur during interstate crises over territory from 1918 to 2007? This section tests the first hypothesis – a land grab is more likely to occur if the disputed territory is a gray area – as well as alternative explanations. I find that a territory disputed in a crisis is approximately twice as likely to be seized in a land grab if that territory is a gray area, while other explanations are less useful for predicting land grabs.

Table 1 presents coefficients and standard errors from logit models with standard errors clustered by crisis. Model One includes the gray area variable alongside control variables for characteristics of the defender: power status, nuclear weapons, and regime type. Model Two adds these same variables taking into account the characteristics of the challenger and joint characteristics of the dyad. Model Three includes the second set of control variables, which capture aspects of the value of the territories. The correlation between gray areas and land grabs remains similar, substantively strong, and statistically significant across the three models.

Table 1: The Determinants of Land Grabs

	(1) Defender Attributes	(2) Dyadic Attributes	(3) Territory Attributes
Gray Area	1.60 (.43)***	1.52 (.46)***	1.36 (.55)***
Power	.10 (.26)	-.08 (.31)	-.09 (.37)
Challenger Power		-.39 (.26)	-.55 (.29)*
Both Great Powers		1.33 (.90)	1.28 (1.07)
Nuclear	.12 (.77)	.15 (.78)	.03 (.83)
Dictatorship	-.51 (.43)	-.73 (.57)	-.69 (.61)
Challenger Dictatorship		-1.25 (.62)**	-1.41 (.63)**
Both Democracies		-1.08 (1.01)	-1.36 (1.12)
Population			.25 (.63)
Resources			-.01 (.52)
Strategic Location			.91 (.56)
Identity Motive			-.81 (.58)
Constant	-.62 (.60)	1.54 (1.21)	1.54 (1.93)
N	131	131	123

* p<.10; ** p<.05; *** p<.01

Figure 2: The Correlates of Land Grabs

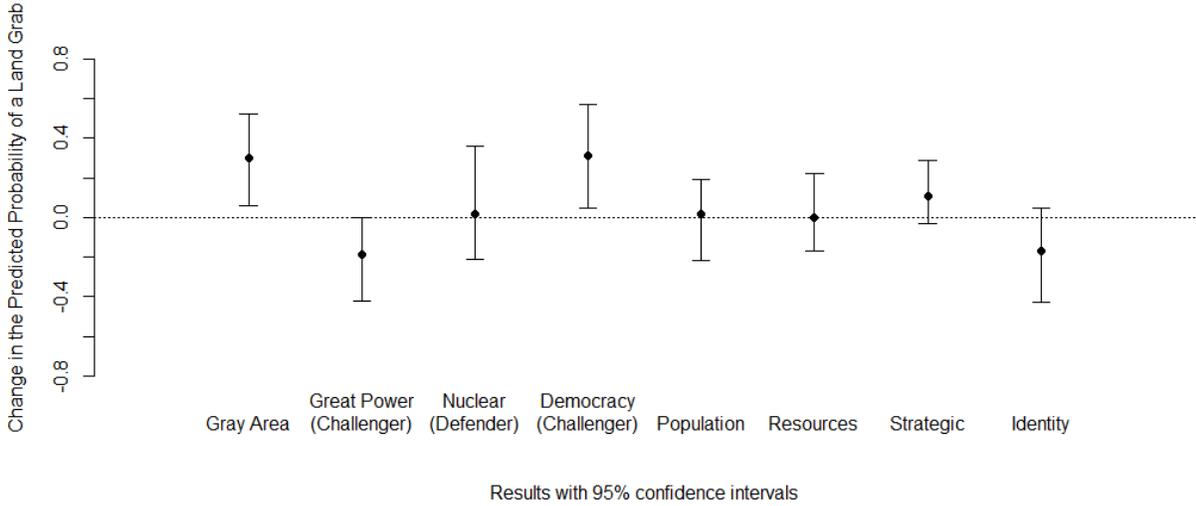


Figure 2 displays these results graphically by depicting the substantive effect of changing each explanatory variable from a zero to a one on the predicted probability of a land grab, for instance changing from a piece of core territory to a gray area.³⁰ All other variables are held at their median values. As Figure 2 shows, a gray area approximately doubles the likelihood of a land grab. That is, a crisis over a piece of core territory has a 24% predicted probability of a land grab, whereas that probability rises to 53% if the territory is a gray area. The importance of gray areas is also plainly visible without a statistical model, as Table 2 demonstrates.

³⁰ Two exceptions for non-binary variables: the great power variable changes from minor power to great power and the population variable changes from no population to villages. Results generated using Model Three in CLARIFY (Tomz et al. 2003).

Table 2: Gray Areas and Land Grabs in Territorial Crises

	No Land Grab	Land Grab	% Land Grab
Core Territory	46	21	31%
Gray Area	20	44	67%

Among the other candidate predictors of land grabs, only challenger regime type reaches statistical significance at the .05 level. There is no strong correlation between power and land grabs. In fact, the average power level of defenders that fell victim to land grabs is slightly higher than defenders that deterred (or otherwise avoided) a land grab. Challengers are, on average, only slightly more powerful than defenders. Accordingly, there is no strong support for the hypothesis that strong states frequently victimize the weak, as Russia did to Ukraine in Crimea. On the contrary, defender and challenger power levels are strongly and positively correlated – this despite the fact that the data contains states with quite diverse levels of power. This tendency for conflict break out between states at similar power levels, although puzzling, is common in interstate conflicts (Moul 2003).

The sole significant result among these variables is the association between democratic challengers and a greater likelihood of a land grab; democracies challenging authoritarian regimes more often commit land grabs. The most compelling explanation for this unexpected finding is that democracies are more prudent in choosing to initiate territorial crises, avoiding situations where they evoke public outcry over an issue and then fail to take a strong action.³¹

In contrast, both joint democracy and nuclear weapons possession unexpectedly fail to correlate with the incidence of land grabs. The lack of a democratic peace effect for land grabs is surprising, and it is not entirely the result of a lack of territorial crises between democracies. Of the sixteen observations for which the ICB dataset codes both sides as democracies, land grabs occur in nine. Similarly, six of eleven defenders armed with nuclear weapons were struck by land grabs, providing no compelling evidence of nuclear deterrence forestalling land grabs.

The four variables accounting for different dimensions of the value of disputed territories also struggle to predict land grabs. Replacing the ICOW data with Huth and Allee (2002) data on the economic, strategic, and ethnic value of disputed territories also yields insignificant results.

One likely reason is that, with the partial exception of ethnic identity motives, the dual effects of these “value” variables offset themselves. A more populous or resource-rich territory is more valuable to the defender, bolstering the credibility of the defender’s deterrent red line protecting the territory

³¹ On whether democracies select more strategically into winnable wars, see Reiter and Stam (1998).

and thereby discouraging a land grab. However, it also makes the territory more valuable to the challenger, encouraging a land grab. The net effect of greater (or lesser) territory value on the expected likelihood of a land grab, if any, is difficult to deduce. The statistical insignificance of the territory value variables is important for two reasons. The first is apparent: these are compelling candidate explanations for land grabs.

Equally important, these variables aid in addressing the most important inferential question regarding the finding that gray areas make land grabs more likely: are land grabs seizing gray areas simply because gray area territories are less valuable? This question is worth asking, because gray areas are, as expected, less valuable by these measures. Although there is no relationship with the ICOW measure of natural resources, gray areas are associated with lower levels of population, strategic location, and identity value. Of those, however, only the correlation with identity motive is statistically significant. Gray areas are associated with lower economic, strategic, and ethnic value using Huth and Allee's measures, but again only ethnic value is statistically significant.

However, two other warning signs that low value is confounding the gray areas finding are absent. First, as discussed, low value by these measures is not a strong predictor of land grabs. Second, including these variables in the model does not weaken the association between gray areas and land grabs. This is notable because these four variables might capture only part of a territory's value. If so, and if low value were behind the gray area finding, controlling for these variables should weaken the relationship between gray areas and land grabs. It does not. The change is small, as is evident from comparing between Model Two and Model Three. Most of this difference is due simply to the eight observations lost due to missing data from including these additional variables.³²

There is a simpler reason to doubt that territorial value is confounding the relationship between gray areas and land grabs. If land grabs merely target gray areas because they target low-value territories, then why are there remarkably few land grabs seizing small pieces of territory across precisely-defined land borders? Any disputed territory can be occupied in increments, so if size and value alone were determinative, land grabs would be more common.

³² This conclusion is based on re-running Model Two without the eight cases.

For an example of the unusual, in 1999 Pakistani forces occupied small but strategically significant positions that fell clearly on India's side of the Line of Control in the Kargil region of Kashmir. Pakistan claimed all of Kashmir but in this instance tried merely to slice off a small piece in a *fait accompli*. The Line of Control provided a clear focal point and red line that Pakistan transgressed. The theory presented above implies that operations like this are likely to backfire and therefore unlikely to take place.

The Kargil operation was a debacle for Pakistan, provoking Indian counterattacks that proved willing to sacrifice the lives of more than five hundred Indian soldiers in order to retake the territory. Indian forces were careful not to cross the Line of Control, even in the air as they conducted bombing operations only within their own territory. The failure of the operation contributed to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's fall from power (Malik 2012). The next section returns to the subject of the consequences of seizing territory that is not a gray area. For present purposes, this example illustrates the sort of seizure of a small territory across a clearly-defined border that could happen routinely. If borders are but lines on a map and if focal points matter little, then small, low-value border territories should be just as vulnerable to this sort of land grab as gray areas. Yet the Kargil operation is an aberration; land grabs seizing small pieces of core territory are far rarer than low territory value alone would predict.

A second inferential concern is the possibility that states claim borders are ambiguous when they want to aggressively challenge them. States that wish to contest a border certainly do have an incentive to contrive an ambiguity in it. If so, the dispute creates the ambiguity rather than results from it. This potential endogeneity is both a measurement problem and an inference problem. The measurement requirement for the ambiguity to exist for at least a decade before the crisis aids in curbing potential endogeneity. In many cases, states resent and contest a border without claiming it is poorly defined, usually by rejecting the legitimacy of the treaty that created it.

Moreover, by separating out the island and ambiguity gray areas as two separate explanatory variables, it is possible to confirm that both are useful predictors of land grabs. Unlike ambiguities, islands are an aspect of physical geography and therefore exogenous to policy. The similarity in the

roles of islands and ambiguities in these crises provides further evidence in favor of the theory in a manner that avoids this source of potential endogeneity.³³

A final but important caveat concerning generalizability is that cases resulting in land grabs are more likely to enter the data as crises than similar cases without land grabs. These cases often reach crisis status because of the tensions created by a land grab. This selection effect is important because it implies that gray areas lead to land grabs much less often in general than in crises. For instance, there are innumerable small islands. Most crises over small islands feature a land grab, but most small islands never become the object of a crisis. Absent further analysis on the effect of gray areas in general (i.e., not just in crises), the results only apply directly to understanding how territorial crises are likely to unfold once they begin.

Overall, the results provide strong confirmation of the pattern observed in the data: gray areas are associated with a sharp increase in the probability of being struck by a land grab in territorial crises from 1918 to 2007. Looking beyond crises to all of the 77 distinct cases of land grabs between 1918 and 2015 (i.e., including land grabs unassociated with an ICB crisis but omitting retaliatory land grabs), 26 struck islands or island-like peninsulas, 21 struck ambiguities in land borders, and one did both. This sums to a total of 48 striking gray areas (62%). It is unlikely that so many land grabs targeted gray areas by chance alone.

The Consequences of Land Grabs

Land grabs lead to a wide variety of outcomes ranging from a successful territorial gain without casualties to the onset of a war in which the regime responsible for the land grab is removed from power. A comprehensive analysis of the fate of land grabs is a task left to future research. This section focuses in on one part of that broader question: under what conditions are land grabs more likely to lead to war? It tests alternative explanations against the hypothesis that land grabs lead to war less often if the seized territory is a gray area, which would explain why land grabs tend to target gray areas.

³³ The island variable is significant in Models 1 and 2, but not Model 3. The ambiguity variable is significant in all three. Both are statistically significant correlates of a lower probability of land grabs provoking war (see next section for war as the dependent variable).

Table 3 displays the results for four models exploring the correlates of whether or not land grabs provoke war. Unlike the previous section, territorial crises are no longer the scope of the analysis, but rather this section examines the full set of land grabs from 1918 to 2015, including twenty-two that occur outside of an ICB-recognized crisis. War is defined using the standard Correlates of War definition, which requires one thousand battle deaths (Sarkees et al. 2010). I again use a logit model with standard errors clustered by crisis. Retaliatory land grabs are omitted. Because the number of land grabs is modest, the first and second columns present results for models with limited sets of control variables. The third column provides a model with the full set of controls. The fourth column presents the same model with retaliatory land grabs included.

For ease of interpretation, I evaluate the implications using the predicted probabilities in Figure 3.³⁴ As Figure 3 depicts, land grabs seizing gray areas are associated with a sharp decrease in the probability of war in comparison to land grabs seizing core territory. The predicted probability of war is 56 percent for a land grab seizing core territory but only 16 percent for a land grab seizing a gray area.³⁵

³⁴ Figure 3 uses Model 6 in Table 3.

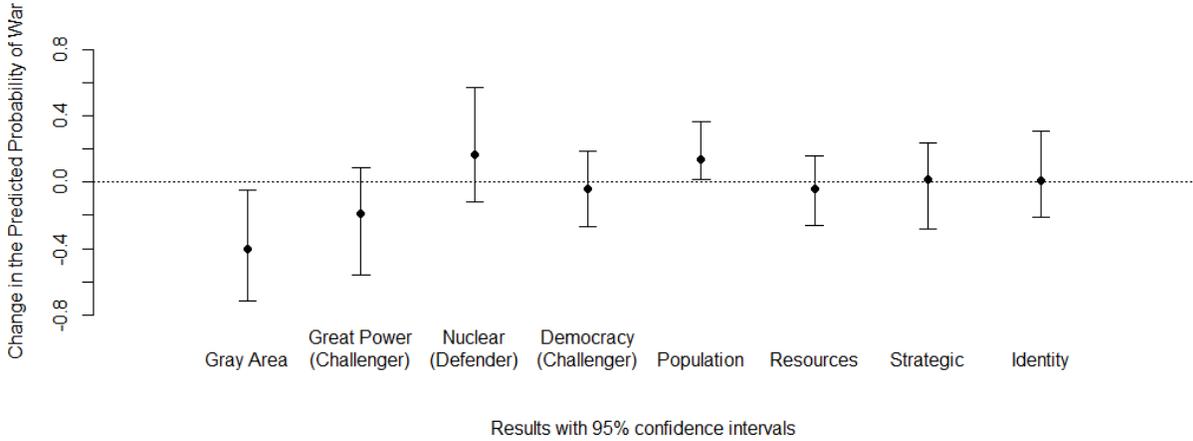
³⁵ One potential concern is that incurring enough casualties to reach the threshold for war is more difficult in island disputes for purely military reasons. States may lack the naval capacity to fight over islands or to land large numbers of ground forces on them. Although the water barrier does not appear to stop land grabs seizing islands, it may constrain subsequent escalation to war by limiting casualties. However, this barrier to escalation is far weaker or absent in disputes over border ambiguities, river islands, peninsulas, or sea islands when the two sides also share a land border. The gray area result remains significant after running the model using only these types of gray areas (i.e., excluding isolated sea islands).

Table 3: Correlates of War among Land Grabs

	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Gray Area	-2.12 (.65)***	-1.69 (.66)**	-2.10 (.87)**	-2.08 (.75)***
Power	-.29 (.49)		-.77 (.65)	-.33 (.52)
Challenger Power	-.35 (.45)		-.77 (.57)	-.66 (.43)
Both Great Powers	2.01 (1.21)*		2.51 (1.43)*	2.36 (1.41)*
Nuclear	.39 (.93)		.89 (1.02)	-.21 (.91)
Dictatorship	.73 (.75)		.97 (.86)	.24 (.69)
Challenger Dictatorship	.28 (.81)		.46 (.95)	.05 (.66)
Both Democracies	1.56 (1.20)		2.43 (1.26)*	.97 (.99)
Population		1.98 (.97)**	2.97 (1.14)***	2.36 (.93)**
Resources		-.16 (.58)	-.26 (.69)	-.40 (.68)
Strategic Location		.83 (.66)	.44 (1.10)	.94 (1.02)
Identity Motive		.22 (.66)	-.02 (.83)	-.31 (.74)
Constant	.55 (1.77)	-4.08 (2.12)*	-4.23 (2.63)	-3.23 (2.37)
N	71	66	66	93

* p<.10; ** p<.05; *** p<.01

Figure 3: When Are Land Grabs More Likely to Lead to War?



Among the alternative explanations, only population reaches statistical significance. Land grabs seizing more populous territories more often lead to war, in line with expectations from the territorial conflict literature. Other dimensions of territorial value are less predictive. Power levels, regime type, and nuclear weapons possession do not provide strong predictors of whether land grabs lead to war.³⁶ Although war is less common when great power challengers take territory from weaker defenders, this result does not reach statistical significance in any model.

The relationship between gray areas and the likelihood of war is evident without statistical processing, as Table 4 shows.³⁷ The most striking feature of Table 4 is the paucity of cases in the first cell, land grabs against core territory that do not lead to war. If the theory put forward in this article is wrong, then land grabs seizing small pieces of core territory should be able to take place without provoking war and, therefore, should occur regularly. They are remarkably rare.

³⁶ Although both interaction terms (both great powers and joint democracy) reach significance at the .1 level, I reran the model using a first logit out of concern that partial separation was afflicting these results due to the number of variables and the scarcity of observations. This procedure is recommended by Bell and Miller (2015). Both interaction terms became insignificant, but the results for gray areas and population remained.

³⁷ Table 4 omits retaliatory land grabs.

Table 4: When Do Land Grabs Lead to War?

	No War	War	% War
Core Territory	9	14	56%
Gray Area	38	10	21%

There are two plausible interpretations of the land grabs that occur despite the lack of a gray area and then lead to war.³⁸ First, these challengers may have decided to try their luck with getting away with land grabs in the mistaken hope that their adversaries would relent to them. This requires some underestimation of the target state's determination to defend core territory. Pakistan's operation in Kargil offers an example of such a miscalculation. Alternatively, states initiating land grabs despite the lack of a gray area may understand that their actions are likely to lead to war and choose to do so anyway. The Iran-Iraq War, the Ogaden War, and the Arab-Israeli wars all seem to better fit this latter view. If so, this small group of land grabs were decisions to start a war, not *fait accompli* attempts.³⁹ The results presented here do not determine which explanation is correct; this requires additional evidence regarding intentions. Either way, the results sustain the theory's prediction that challengers generally cannot get away with land grabs that seize core territory.

The Evolution of Territorial Conquest

By conceptualizing land grabs as *faits accomplis* and developing a theory of why *faits accomplis* tend to seize gray area territories, this article isolates a specific and common type of territorial conquest. What remains to be considered is why land grabs in general and this finding in particular are so important for understanding the evolution of territorial conquest.

It is widely believed that territorial conquest declined markedly in recent decades, now reaching the point where it is reasonable to hope that it will be much less prevalent in the 21st Century than it was throughout previous eras of human history. Zacher (2001) documents the decline in territorial aggression over the course of the 20th century, attributing it to the gradual strengthening of a norm of

³⁸ One potential concern is that incurring enough casualties to reach the threshold for war is more difficult in island disputes for purely military reasons. States may lack the naval capacity to fight over islands or to land large numbers of ground forces on them. Although the water barrier does not appear to stop land grabs seizing islands, it may constrain subsequent escalation to war. However, this barrier to escalation is far weaker (or nonexistent) in disputes over border ambiguities, river islands, peninsulas, or sea islands when the two sides also share a land border. Running the model using only these types of gray areas – excluding isolated sea islands – does not significantly change the results.

³⁹ A *fait accompli* requires, by definition, the strategic intention to attempt to get away with a limited gain without provoking escalation.

territorial integrity.⁴⁰ Fazal finds strong support for the influence this norm against conquest, particularly with respect to the dramatic decline in attempts to conquer entire countries outright (“state deaths”) after 1945.⁴¹ However, within this aggregate decline in territorial conquest is a more nuanced history.

Figure 4 tells a new and more complete story of the modern history of territorial conquest by dividing it into three distinct types: invasions attempting to conquer entire countries, land grabs that seize part of a state’s territorial core, and land grabs seizing gray areas.⁴² Up until World War II, all three were common. Figure 4 shows how that changed.⁴³

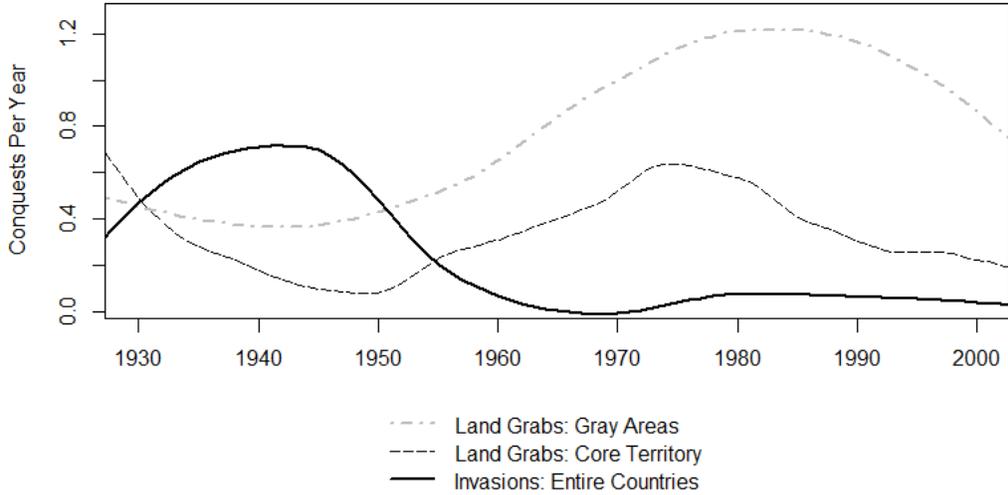
⁴⁰ Also see Atzili (2012).

⁴¹ Fazal (2011:53) suggests that limited territorial incursions might be less threatening to the territorial integrity norm than invasions conquering entire countries.

⁴² The LOESS curves in Figure 4 make use of data from 1918 to 2015, but given the unreliability of the LOESS curves near the boundaries of the data, I limited Figure 4 to the 1930-2000 period. In order to best display the trends, the curve for core territory land grabs is smoothed to a lesser degree than the other two.

⁴³ Data on conquests of entire countries were adapted from Fazal (2011). These cases were omitted from all prior analyses. Unlike Fazal, I include failed attempts to conquer entire countries. Figure 4 include all land grabs, not just those during an ICB crisis. Note that I define “territorial conquest” as using military forces to seize territory. This is distinct from Zacher’s (2001) “territorial aggression,” which requires conquests to be violent attacks.

Figure 4: Territorial Conquest, 1930-2000



First, attempts to conquer states in their entirety became extremely rare, a stark change punctuated by the end of the Second World War. Because these cases account for a disproportionate share of the wars and casualties from territorial conquest, this decline is the primary reason why the overall decline in territorial conflict seems so pronounced.

Second, land grabs seizing part of another nation's territorial core continued after 1945 before declining sharply in the early 1980s.⁴⁴ These cases account for most of the rest of the wars over territory. Since this second decline, interstate war over territory has been rare. Zacher dates the "acceptance" stage of the development of the norm of territorial integrity as commencing in 1945, the "institutionalization" stage in 1976. These dates roughly correspond to the beginnings of the two distinct dramatic declines in particular types of conquest.

Third, land grabs seizing gray area territories have been more persistent.⁴⁵ This is the most common form of territorial conquest in the full 1918-2015 period, but that tendency has become particularly pronounced since the early 1980s due to the declines in other forms of conquest; almost every land grab since then has targeted a gray area. These cases fell below the radar of past analyses because they are so much less likely to lead to violence and war. War over territory has declined more than conquests of territory.

There are indications in the data of a possible decline in even this lingering form of territorial conquest, starting around 2000. Only time will tell if this is the beginning of a third (and final?) sharp decline or merely a temporary lull. Even if land grabs seizing gray areas have begun to decline,

⁴⁴ Although core territory land grabs appear to decline strongly for a window of time in the 1940s and 1950s, this decline is likely due to 1) the exclusion of state formation cases (discussed previously) and 2) the severity of World War II, which tended to supersede smaller land grabs.

⁴⁵ These land grabs appear to grow more common until the 1980s, but some of this increase is due merely to the growing number of states in the international system. The theory developed in this article implies no claim that gray areas have or will become a stronger cause of land grabs over time. The evidence is consistent with this non-prediction. The rising prominence of land grabs seizing gray areas as a proportion of all conquests is due to their persistence while other forms of conquest declined.

projecting these trends forward still suggests that they are likely to constitute the predominant form of territorial conquest in the years to come, as they have for several decades.

This offers both good and bad news for international security. The bad news is that it is too soon to hope that the world is on the verge of seeing the end of territorial conquest. The good news is that although land grabs seizing gray areas may continue to occur, they rarely lead to war. This has concrete implications for future crises. For instance, scenarios involving Chinese land grabs in the Spratly and Senkaku Islands remain plausible. However, history suggests that the Falklands would be the wrong precedent to apply to such contingencies; land grabs seizing islands rarely lead to wars. In sum, territorial conquests have not stopped occurring, but rather they have become smaller, more targeted, and less violent.

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