

The Fait Accompli in Interstate Crises: Land Grabs from 1918 to 2007

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ABSTRACT

It is widely believed that states make gains in crises by issuing coercive threats, signaling resolve and receiving concessions if their threats are credible. In crises over territory, however, this is rarely the case. States gain territory far more often by unilaterally occupying it in a fait accompli than by coercive threats. Using newly-compiled data on all 'land grab' faits accomplis since 1918, I show that 102 land grabs seized territory in that period, in contrast to twelve coerced territorial cessions. I then explore the conditions under which faits accomplis are 1) likely to occur and 2) likely to lead to war. I develop a theory explaining why 'gray area' territories are especially vulnerable to faits accomplis. These gray areas are regions that are not clearly a part of the territorial core and so can be sacrificed without compromising the deterrent red line protecting that core. Gray areas are operationalized as either islands located between two core territories or regions where borders are ambiguous. Nearly two-thirds of all land grabs targeted these gray areas. Analyzing interstate crises over territory from 1918 to 2007, I find that states are twice as likely to seize gray area territories in comparison to other disputed territories. In line with the theory, states more often 'get away' with these land grabs; land grabs that strike gray areas are half as likely as other land grabs to lead to war.

The prevailing view of coercive bargaining is that states make gains through a combination of coercive threats and signals of resolve during acute crises.¹ Credible threats elicit concessions. This theory of victory is undeniably compelling. It fits important cases. German threats coerced Czechoslovakia into relinquishing the Sudetenland at Munich in 1938. The United States pressured the Soviet Union into withdrawing nuclear missiles from Cuba in 1962. However, the broader history of interstate crises over territory paints a different picture.

The *fait accompli* – not coercion – is the primary means short of war through which states wrest territory from their adversaries. From 1918 to 2014, I found only twelve instances in which a state used explicit threats to coerce another into ceding disputed territory. Making use of original data on all 'land grab' *faits accomplis* since 1918, I identify 102 land grabs that seized territory by *fait accompli* in that same span. The gap is wider still in more recent decades because most of the coerced cessions occurred in a cluster preceding the Second World War. Only one coerced territorial cession has taken place since 1945, in comparison to 75 land grabs in that same period. Although these are not the only two ways in which states acquire territory, they are the two methods – like crises – that fall into the middle ground between waging war for territory and reaching a more cooperative bargain via lengthy negotiations outside a crisis atmosphere.

The International Relations literature has long regarded the *fait accompli* as a risky crisis tactic – one that makes war more likely – yet surprisingly little research has been dedicated to the topic. Many questions remain unanswered. How common are *faits accomplis*? Under what conditions are *faits*

¹ Fearon 1994; Fearon 1997; George and Simons 1994; Jervis 1989; Lebow 1981; Morrow 1999; Schelling 1966; Schultz 1998; Slantchev 2011; Snyder and Diesing 1977.

faits accomplis likely to occur? Under what conditions are states able to successfully get away with *faits accomplis* without provoking war? The paper addresses these questions by examining the strategic competition between *faits accomplis* and the countervailing efforts to set red lines to deter them.

Building on neglected insights from the work of Thomas Schelling, the paper develops a theory explaining why gray areas in territorial red lines render *faits accomplis* more effective at seizing gains without provoking war.² In territorial conflicts, I use the term “gray area” to refer to regions that are not clearly a part of the territorial core and so can be sacrificed without compromising the protection of that core. In contrast, conceding even a small piece of what is unmistakably part of the territorial core undercuts the deterrent commitment to defend the rest. There are two common types of gray areas in territorial conflicts: islands located between two core territories and regions where the border is ambiguously defined.³ Whereas the territorial conflict literature tends to focus on the intrinsic value of disputed territories – strategic, economic, and ethnic – I show that the strategic vulnerability of exposed gray area territories provides a stronger predictor of land grabs.⁴

The paper examines the relationships between gray area territories, land grabs, and the onset of war in territorial crises from 1918 to 2007. Although *faits accomplis* take many forms beyond seizures of territory, territorial conflicts offer the best single domain within which to examine the role of *faits accomplis* in interstate crises, for two reasons. First, territory has long ranked as perhaps the foremost issue over which states come into conflict – and the issue most associated with the onset of war.⁵ Second, crisis outcomes and the extent to which each side “won” or “lost” can be difficult to measure accurately, but changes in the military control of territory offer a comparatively objective basis for identifying gains and losses.

The paper presents the following results, the first two of which are descriptive in nature: First, states far more often gain territory by *fait accompli* than by coercing cessions. Second, nearly two-thirds of all land grabs since 1918 struck one of these two types of gray areas. Conversely, land grabs seizing non-gray-area territories, even if quite small in size, are surprisingly rare. Third, land grabs are twice as common in crises over gray area territories in comparison to crises over other territories. States are less likely to seize a disputed territory without a gray area to exploit. Fourth, land grabs striking gray areas lead to war half as often as land grabs striking other territories. States find it difficult to “get away” with a land grab unless the territory is a gray area. Overall, I find that since 1918 the predominant form of territorial ‘gain-making’ short of war has been *faits accomplis* that work around territorial deterrent red lines to pick off vulnerable gray area territories.

² Schelling 1960; Schelling 1966.

³ Although any study of crises is prone to selection effects – a problem I return to in later sections – these offer two comparatively exogenous sources of gray areas in deterrent red lines. On the inferential challenges of studying crises: Fearon 1994; Fearon 2002.

⁴ Carter 2010; Diehl and Goertz 2002, 15-21; Huth 1996; Tir and Vazquez 2012; Wiegand 2011.

⁵ E.g., Vasquez and Henahan 2001.

For example, when Russia decided to wrest the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014, it could have proclaimed its demand and backed it with the threat of overwhelming force. Instead, Russia acted unilaterally to occupy and annex the territory. Although Crimea is not an island, it has the same physical geographic separation from the territorial core of Ukraine – and location between Ukraine and Russia – that makes for a gray area. Subsequently, Russia could have seized additional regions of Eastern Ukraine – Donetsk and Luhansk – with a majority of Russian speakers. Instead, Russia limited its efforts there to arming the rebels and providing “volunteers” to thicken their ranks. These areas fall within Ukraine’s territorial core. All of this accords with the recent history of territorial crises. Most gains are made by *fait accompli*, not coercion. These land grabs limit their ambition to gray areas and – more often than not – avoid open war by doing so.

The paper proceeds as follows: The first section defines *fait accompli* as a term and concept. The second develops the theoretical logic connecting gray areas in deterrent red lines to *faits accomplis*. The third provides details with regard to data and measurement. The fourth establishes that, at least since 1918, states have far more often made gains by *fait accompli* than by coercion – both in general and during crises. The fifth provides evidence for an empirical association between gray areas and land grabs. The sixth section evaluates the impact of both gray areas and land grabs on the likelihood of war with special emphasis on the interaction effect between them. I conclude with a discussion of how the prevalence of *faits accomplis* might amend existing theories of crisis bargaining and the causes of war.

Faits Accomplis

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.⁶ 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. Sometimes this strategy 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 offers an example of a *fait accompli* that backfired by provoking a strong military response retaking the lost territory. Although *faits accomplis* come in many forms across diverse issue areas, the land grab seizing territory is perhaps the quintessential *fait accompli*.

The two most important elements in the definition are “limited and “unilateral.” “Limited” does not mean unimportant, but rather only that the *fait accompli* does not aim to conquer the deterrer

⁶ For similar definitions: Schelling 1966, 44-45; Snyder and Diesing 1977, 227.

outright or change the regime.⁷ This is crucial because the strategy targets a gain small enough that the adversary will let it go rather than escalate.

“Unilateral” means that the adversary does not consent to the change in the status quo, which is instead imposed upon that adversary to its detriment. Coercion, in contrast, involves making a threat to pressure the adversary into consenting to a concession, however reluctantly. Coercion and the *fait accompli* are two fundamentally different ways of acquiring something from an adversary.

More precisely, the *fait accompli* is an alternative to the type of coercion known as compellence. Compellence is coercion demanding a revision to the status quo; unlike deterrence, which employs threats to preserve the status quo.⁸ In his studies of compellence, Sechser draws exactly this distinction between coercive gains and gains by *fait accompli* (“compellence” versus “compulsion”).⁹ Schelling drew a similar distinction between coercion and “brute force” but considered only the most aggressive forms of brute force, such as all-out invasion, regime change, and mass killings.¹⁰ Although the *fait accompli* is a type of brute force (a unilateral imposition), it is brute force on a much smaller – and sometimes nonviolent – scale. The aim is to escape escalation rather than prevail after it.

Faits accomplis have received surprisingly little attention in the International Relations literature. The most significant treatment comes in the form of the longstanding assumption in the causes of war literature that *faits accomplis* are a risky crisis tactic that greatly exacerbates the likelihood of war.¹¹ Van Evera, for instance, characterizes the *fait accompli* as a “halfway step to war.” George and Smoke similarly identify *faits accomplis* as one form of partial deterrence failure.¹² From the perspective of deterrence, *faits accomplis* are an intermediate form of deterrence failure, worse for the deterrer than maintaining the status quo but better than an unlimited attack. Although providing an important starting point for thinking about *faits accomplis*, the literature provides neither a theory of *faits accomplis* nor a clear sense of how prevalent they are in international politics.

The definition of *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 deterrer that the challenger has a sufficiently high probability of escaping heavy retribution. In itself, however, this answer is inadequate. Every disputed territory consists of innumerable small pieces. Few are seized. The question is why *faits accomplis* seize some small territories but not others.

⁷ This creates a definitional oddity wherein a single action may be a *fait accompli* with respect to one adversary but not another. Iraq’s 1990 invasion and annexation of Kuwait was a *fait accompli* with respect to the United States, and Saudi Arabia. However, it was not a *fait accompli* with respect to Kuwait because it was unlimited from the Kuwaiti standpoint.

⁸ Schelling (1966, ch. 2) emphasized the greater difficulty of compellence in his original formulation of the deterrence-compellence dichotomy.

⁹ Sechser 2011; Sechser and Fuhrmann 2013.

¹⁰ Schelling 1966.

¹¹ Snyder and Diesing 1977, 227; Stern et al. 1989, 20; Van Evera 1998, 10.

¹² George and Smoke 1974, 536-540.

Red Lines, Gray Areas, and *Faits Accomplis*

The threat of the *fait accompli* is one of the fundamental challenges for deterrence, because deterrence is not an all or nothing enterprise. States must deter outright invasion and conquest, but they also must deter more limited predations, which often take the form of *faits accomplis*. When an adversary seizes a small piece of territory, states confront a difficult decision 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 fundamentally 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 deterring the first *fait accompli* fails, how do states then prevent being taken apart piece by piece with ‘salami tactics’? These tactics entail slicing off the objective piece by piece in small increments.¹³ 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 limited.

To manage the problem of protecting so many small pieces of territory against *faits accomplis*, states must set a deterrent red line that encapsulates these pieces into one larger whole that they can more credibly threaten to defend. A red line is defined as the part of a deterrent demand that distinguishes compliance from violation.¹⁴ All deterrent threats demand that the challenger not take certain actions. Faced with a deterrent demand, the adversary has a range of responses available. The deterrer must divide these actions into those that are acceptable and those that are unacceptable. The deterrer threatens retribution for noncompliant actions, but not for compliant actions.¹⁵ Red lines are therefore a necessary component of all deterrent threats, even though the vast majority of threats do not use the term “red line.” I focus here on deterrent red lines prohibiting the seizure of territory. All states set a red line protecting their territory against invasion.

Red lines best deter *faits accomplis* when they are 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, conspicuous, and clearly different from nearby alternatives.¹⁶ In territorial conflicts, physical geography and political geography provide these focal points in the forms of major waterways and established borders, respectively.

If an adversary 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. If a deterrer were to allow violations of the line to go uncontested, how could the next line be credible? Because the deterrer would be in dire straits after abandoning this line, the deterrer can more credibly threaten to

¹³ Schelling 1966, 66 & 77.

¹⁴ The definition readily extends to compellent threats, which also contain red lines.

¹⁵ Schelling 1966, 4 & 74.

¹⁶ Schelling 1960, 53-67.

fight to defend it. The critical question is, as Schelling put it, “If not here, where?”¹⁷ Deterrence becomes more challenging when the answer to that question readily presents itself.

Gray areas create this problem. Gray areas are defined as 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 the focal point that the adversary will be reluctant to cross. Similarly, losing territory in an un-demarcated border area is different from losing territory that is clearly on the deterrer’s side of an established border. These gray areas are vulnerable to *faits accomplis*.

In territorial conflicts, 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. The next section explains why – for Vietnam – enduring a *fait accompli* seizing several of these islands without escalating in retaliation would inflict less damage on the credibility of Vietnamese deterrence 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 imprecise with respect to a particular area. Fourth, a gray area exists when a state is imprecise about its territorial claims in its public declarations.¹⁸ I have found this fourth possibility to be rare in territorial crises, unlike the third.¹⁹ The following example illustrates the distinction.

India’s seizure of the Siachen region in 1984 targeted an ambiguity in Pakistan’s deterrent red line in Kashmir. 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 several competing 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 between these interpretations. By the 1980s, the temptation to score a political victory by advancing territorially had grown stronger. Both sides articulated unambiguous claims to the region, but the ambiguity in the border remained. Reacting to intelligence reports of an imminent Pakistani *fait accompli* seizing Siachen, India moved first. The Indian Army advanced rapidly by helicopter and established military posts on the mountain peaks on the far

¹⁷ Schelling 1966, 159.

¹⁸ I have observed that ambiguity in deterrence usually takes the form of ambiguity about the punishment if a red line is violated, not ambiguity about the where the line is drawn. For example, when U.S. President Barack Obama declared, “There will be costs” for a Russian military intervention in the Crimean Peninsula, he was relatively clear about the red line but quite ambiguous about the punishment for its violation. Beard 2014.

¹⁹ Crises tend to arise only after states make conflicting territorial claims.

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.²⁰ 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. Gibler 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).²¹ Vazquez 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.²² Carter and Goemans find that new borders tend to form based on pre-existing administrative boundaries because these boundaries provide a focal point that enables bargains.²³ Huth et al. find that international legal principles and agreements provide focal points that increase the rate at which territorial conflicts get resolved.²⁴ Fortna 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.²⁵ Fazal finds that buffer states between more powerful states have been especially frequent victims of territorial aggression.²⁶ Buffer states, like islands, fall outside established-border focal points. Although deterrence of territorial aggrandizement against third-party buffer states lies beyond the empirical scope of this study, the theory implies that extended deterrence with respect to buffer states will suffer from the same challenge as deterrence with respect to gray areas.

This reasoning sums to a theory explaining why clear red lines set on focal points are critical for effective deterrence and why gray areas in red lines leave openings for *faits accomplis*. Two primary hypotheses emerge out of this theory.

H1: Gray areas make *faits accomplis* more likely.

H2: *Faits accomplis* that strike gray areas are less likely to lead to war.

Gray areas make *faits accomplis* more likely (H1) by making them more effective (H2). Through targeting gray areas, *faits accomplis* are better able to make gains while avoiding war than *faits accomplis* targeting other territories. Whereas the deterrer can afford to lose a gray area without

²⁰ Raghavan 2002.

²¹ Gibler 2007, 517-521 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 supports Gibler'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.

²² Vazquez 1995, 288.

²³ Carter and Goemans 2011.

²⁴ Huth et al. 2011; Huth et al. 2012.

²⁵ Fortna 2003, 343 & 357; Fortna 2004, 22-23.

²⁶ Fazal 2011.

compromising the broader line around the territorial core, losing even a small piece within that core calls into question the commitment to defend the next piece. As a result, the challenger is more likely to seize such territories.

Taking the two hypotheses together, the expectation is that gray areas make *faits accomplis* more likely to take place but less likely to escalate to war if they do take place. Gray areas increase the likelihood of war through one mechanism but reduce it through another. The net effect of gray areas on the likelihood of war depends on which of these mechanisms predominates. I return to this point in the final section of the paper, where it has significant implications for the relationships between gray areas, *faits accomplis*, and war.

Data and Measurement

The first question taken up below is whether the *fait accompli* or coercion (compellence) has been the primary method short of war through which states have wrested territory from adversaries. Therefore, I begin here by defining land grabs and coerced territorial cessions.²⁷ I then consider the measurement and sources of the data on territorial crises used for the subsequent statistical analyses. In particular, I define territorial crises, gray areas, and the set of control variables used to examine alternative explanations for land grabs.

Land Grabs

A land grab is defined as occurring when one state uses its military to unilaterally seize a disputed piece of territory with the intention to assume control of that territory.²⁸ This definition of land grab excludes the majority of cross-border military operations because they lack the intention to assume control of additional territory, i.e., to change the border.²⁹ These incursions that are not land grabs include interventions in civil wars, raids on rebel bases, peacekeeping missions, and navigation errors by military patrols.

²⁷ An online appendix associated with these data will contain brief summaries explaining the main coding decisions for each case. 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 as cited.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ It was not possible to apply the definition of land grabs to cases taking place during state formation processes. When no prior interstate border exists, it is infeasible to identify land grabs that represent changes to it. These cases also blur the lines between civil and interstate conflict. 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.

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. 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 violence or casualties.

Although all *faits accomplis* seizing territories are land grabs, not all land grabs are *faits accomplis*. The definition of *fait accompli* requires that a land grab occur with a particular strategic logic: “in an attempt to get away with that gain when the adversary chooses to relent rather than escalate in retaliation.” Due to the difficulty of observing this intent, this requirement is not part of the definition of land grab. In a few cases, however, it appears that the challenger embarked on the land grab knowing and accepting that war would ensue. The 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars illustrate this point and contrast with, for example, Argentina’s hope that it could get away with seizing the Falkland Islands in 1982. Some of the minority of land grabs that led to war may not have been *faits accomplis*.

To identify land grabs between 1918 and 2014, 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.³⁰ 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.

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.³¹ 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.³² 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

³⁰ On these datasets: 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 MIDs. I also made more limited use of ICOW Territorial Claims data and Huth and Allee Territorial Dispute data. Hensel et al. 2008; Huth and Allee 2002; Huth 1996. As necessary, I used secondary sources to confirm the existence of a land grab.

³¹ Although the ICOW (Territorial Claims) dataset 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. Also, many of the cases in this category are outright conquests of entire states, which are not *faits accomplis*. Hensel et al. 2008.

³² Zacher 2001 provides a list of “interstate territorial aggressions,” but it leaves out many land grabs because it selects on violence.

coerced cessions, legal settlements, and negotiated compromises. Because neither dataset was designed to specifically identify land grabs, new data are required.³³ 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.

Coerced Cessions

To assess how often states gain territory by coercion, I utilize Sechser's definition of the coercive method of making a gain: "an explicit demand by one state (the challenger) that another state (the target) alter the status quo in some material way, backed by a threat of military force if the target does not comply." This definition includes verbal threats to take territory in a land grab. Sechser applied this definition to create the Militarized Compellent Threats (MCT) dataset. This dataset is the principal source of the list of coerced cessions in the next section. Despite using the same definition of coercion, I identify fewer instances of successful territorial coercion. The discrepancy arises because I define territorial issues more narrowly, requiring actual change in land borders or the attempt to do so. Sechser treats a broader range of issues as territorial in nature, including the use of roads, control of (but not sovereignty over) canals, and fishing rights in disputed waters.³⁴ Many of the instances of successful territorial coercion in the MCT dataset involve stakes smaller than sovereignty over pieces of land.

Territorial Crises

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."³⁵ The unit of analysis is the crisis actor: one state involved in one crisis. More specifically, the statistical analyses to follow examine primary crisis actors directly involved in territorial disputes during crises that begin in peacetime.

As it examines deterrent red lines, the analysis is designed to explain whether or not each crisis actor is struck by a land grab. The exclusive focus is on the red lines of states at risk of losing territory to an adversary land grab.³⁶ The data also include whether or not each crisis actor commits a land grab.

³³ Both codebooks and datasets are available from the Correlates of War webpage. Also see Diehl and Goertz 2002, 53-54.

³⁴ Sechser 2011.

³⁵ Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997, 3. One drawback of the definition for this study is its propensity to exclude aggressors from the data on the grounds that they did not view a particular confrontation as threatening. Focusing on deterrers mitigates this problem.

³⁶ Neither ICB variable distinguishing territorial crises is suitable for this analysis. First, the "gravity" of a crisis includes the option "territorial threat." However, "territorial threat" includes cases such as support for a separatist rebel group where the challenger seeks no territory from the deterrer. Second, the "issue of the crisis" includes

A territory can enter a crisis 1) occupied by the crisis actor, 2) occupied by the adversary, or 3) unoccupied. States cannot deter the seizure of a territory that their adversary already occupies. It is therefore necessary to exclude crisis actors whose deterrent red lines are not open to violation by land grab because the adversary already occupied the territory prior to the crisis. However, the results are robust to including them.

The analysis focuses on 146 primary crisis actors at risk of land grabs (deterriers) in 104 interstate crises. Of these deterriers, land grabs strike 69 (47%), an indication that territorial disputes often reach crisis status due to a land grab. Gray areas occur in 60 cases (41%). This high incidence of gray areas may indicate that crises are more likely to break out over territorial gray areas than other disputed (or disputable) border areas.

I exclude from the following analysis all cases like Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait where the disputed territory was the full territory of a state.³⁷ Neither coercion nor the *fait accompli* is well suited to this unlimited objective. *Faits accomplis* by definition seize something of limited value in an attempt to get away with the gain without provoking war. Unlimited invasions imply a strategy more aggressive than a *fait accompli* and leave the adversary no choice but to fight a war or lose everything.³⁸ Similarly, coercion relies on asking for little enough that the other side prefers capitulation to resistance. Regardless, because states have only rarely surrendered their sovereignty without a fight, including conflicts over the full territory of a state would only strengthen the discrepancy documented in the next section.

Gray Areas: Islands and Border Ambiguities

The explanatory variable *gray area* is coded as [1] if the contested territory is an island, island-like peninsula, or border ambiguity; [0] otherwise. The island cases include islands at sea, river islands, and islands in large lakes. Island-like peninsulas also qualify for inclusion. I include as gray areas even those islands whose legal status is unambiguous, because these islands fall awkwardly between the

the option "military-security," which encompasses territory. This variable includes many other types of issues, e.g., issues of 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 in borders.

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ I found that challengers either try to get away with a limited gain – seeking to acquire only quite small pieces of a deterrer's territory – or accept that the deterrer will resist fully and aim for the full territory. Attempt to acquire, for instance, half of another state's territory are exceedingly rare. If the stakes are high enough that the deterrer will resist fully, there is little reason to limit war aims.

territorial cores of the two disputants.³⁹ The underlying criterion for gray areas is unmistakable physical geographic separateness from the territorial core.⁴⁰

Gray areas also take the form of preexisting 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 rather than 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 different occasions. Most ambiguities exist in regions where the differences in possible interpretations seemed unimportant at the time but became more so over time. Many were created when a European Power delimited administrative boundaries between two of its own colonies. 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, frequently originating 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 *fait accompli* struck the one small 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 the next section.

I do not include in the *gray area* variable the two rarer types of gray areas in territorial red lines found in the data. The first are territorial enclaves, specifically West Berlin. The second are overseas colonies like Goa (for Portugal), Western Sahara (for Spain), and West Irian (for the Netherlands). I leave these out because military indefensibility offers a powerful alternative explanation for why land grabs might be more common in these cases. These are sets of cases in which the adversary tends to have far greater access to the disputed territory than the deterrer. The deterrers are usually thousands of miles away, whereas the challengers are directly adjacent or surround the territory entirely. Islands and

³⁹ Extending the metaphor, 'black' territories fall within the deterrer's territorial core while 'white' territories belong clearly to the challenger. Gray areas lie in between the two.

⁴⁰ Although the propensities of islands and ill-defined borders to promote territorial conflict do not come as surprises, these specific relationships to land grabs have not previously been recognized. Fravel 2008; Gibler 2007, 519-520; Hensel et al. 2008, 130; Huth 1996, 20-26; Wiegand 2011.

ambiguous regions in land borders, in contrast, provide no consistent military advantage to challengers over deterrers; 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 robust to including them as gray areas.

A case culminates in war [1] rather than peace [0] if the ICB dataset codes that case as a “full-scale war.” “Serious clashes” or “minor clashes” do not make the cut. This choice is necessary to minimize the possibility of tautology. Because some land grabs involve limited acts of violence, tautology would afflict a model in which land grabs are the explanatory variable and outcomes including limited force the dependent variable. To minimize tautology, war is defined strictly as the highest level of violence among the options in the ICB data.

Control Variables

There are two sets of control variables, one with characteristics of the state and the second with characteristics of the disputed territories. The first set of control variables fall into three categories: power status, possession of nuclear weapons, and regime type. Each accounts for an established hypothesis on interstate conflict. More powerful challengers, especially great powers, should be better able to take advantage of weaker states. More powerful deterrers, especially those with nuclear arsenals, should be better able to deter land grabs. Per democratic peace theory, democracies might be less likely to commit land grabs, especially against other democracies, and any land grabs that do occur (one democracy against another) should be less likely to lead to war.⁴¹

Data for these variables comes from the ICB dataset in order to maintain comparability with other ICB-based studies. For each control variable, the data includes the value for the crisis actor (the deterrer), its primary adversary (the challenger), and an interaction between them.⁴² Where necessary, I filled gaps by collecting missing data on adversary characteristics in accordance with ICB criteria. 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. Nuclear weapons possession is a dichotomous variable for each crisis actor. Due to the rarity of territorial crises between nuclear powers, I include only a control variable for whether or not the deterrer has nuclear weapons.⁴³ The regime type variable records whether each crisis actor is a democracy or a dictatorship in a dichotomous variable.⁴⁴ An interaction term marks cases of joint democracy.

I supplement these with Huth and Allee’s variables measuring the strategic, economic, and ethnic value of the disputed territories.⁴⁵ These are elements of the intrinsic value of a territory irrespective of whether or not that territory is a gray area. These controls address the concern that gray

⁴¹ E.g., Oneal and Russett 1997.

⁴² The primary adversary is the state that stands to gain territory from or lose territory to the crisis actor.

⁴³ Including additional nuclear controls creates multicollinearity for several models.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ Huth and Allee 2002.

areas correlate with land grabs and outcomes because they tend to be small territories, not because they are gray. All three are defined with respect to the challenger. Strategic value takes any of several forms: proximity to military bases, location blocking a main potential invasion route, location permitting the opening of a second front, proximity to major shipping lanes, or location providing an outlet to the sea. The measurement criteria for economic value focus on natural resources (rather than, say, the territory's economic output, if any), including rich fishing grounds and seabed minerals for islands. Ethnic value exists when an ethnic group controls one nation and seeks to integrate co-ethnics who are a minority across the border. Although these variables cannot perfectly gauge the value that crisis actors place on disputed territories, they offer the best data available for that purpose.

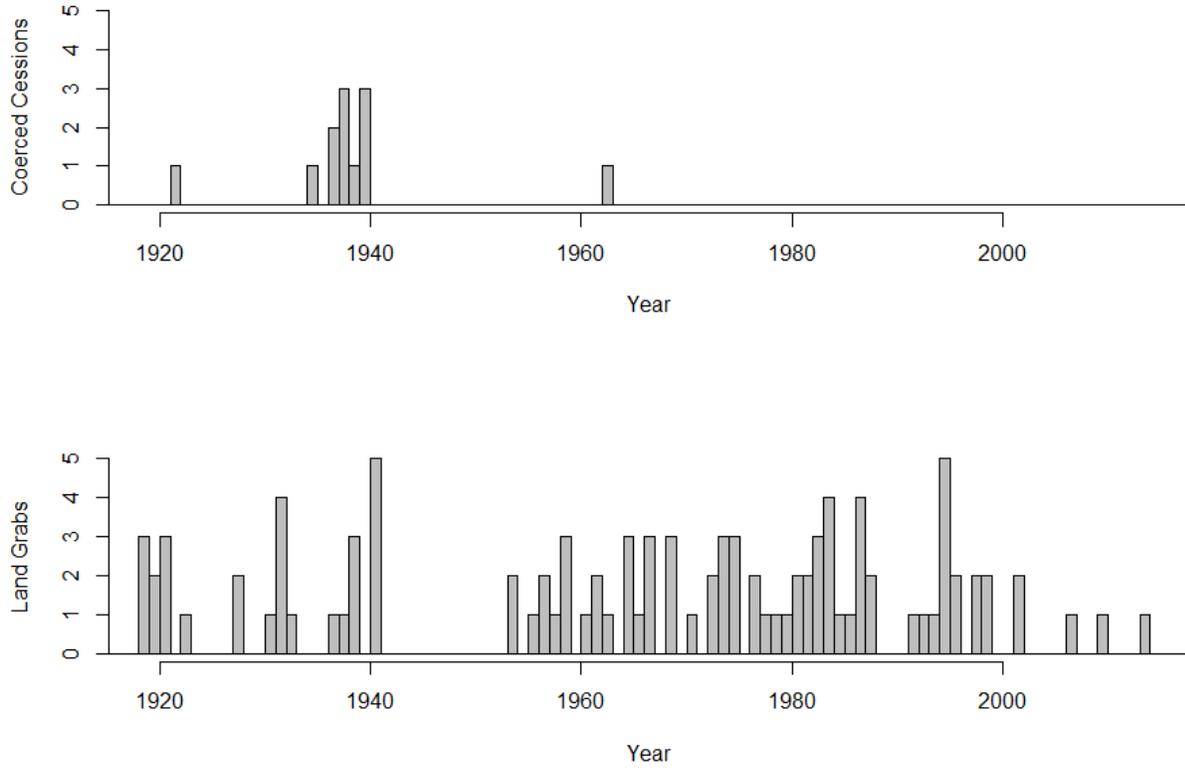
How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries

At issue is a basic question about how states make gains at the expense of their adversaries by means short of war. The established view of crisis bargaining offers a clear answer.⁴⁶ For states that desire something – for this study, a piece of territory – from an adversary, the first step is to make a coercive threat demanding the concession. Through actions like mobilizing forces and firm public statements of commitment, states signal resolve and enhance the credibility of their threats. If a threat is sufficiently credible, the adversary relents and grants a concession in order to avoid war.

Despite its appeal, the problem for this view is a simple one: how often does it happen? Do states make gains by coercing concessions? Or instead by unilaterally taking those gains in a *fait accompli*? This section takes up this question by examining all coerced cessions and all land grabs from 1918 to 2014. Most took place during ICB-recognized crises, but I include in this section even cases that did not in order to provide the complete picture of how states have extracted territories from rivals. Figure 1 displays the history of land grabs since 1918 against that for coerced territorial cessions.

⁴⁶ I speak here of the prevailing view in the crisis bargaining literature, not the territorial conflict literature.

Figure 1: When and How States Acquire Territory from Adversaries



Acquiring territory by coercion is surprisingly rare. Not once in the last fifty years has a state successfully coerced another into ceding territory under threat without using its military to seize the territory first.⁴⁷ Since 1945, a coerced territorial cession has happened only once. Indonesia pressured the Netherlands into relinquishing what is now Indonesia's half of New Guinea in 1963. In the full period, 1918-2014, the number of coerced territorial cessions grows to twelve.⁴⁸ Table 1 lists these coerced cessions.

In contrast, states have unilaterally deployed military forces to seize territory at least 102 times since 1918. Seventy five of the 102 occurred since 1945, which offers a particularly stark contrast to the single coerced cession during this period. States gain territory *by fait accompli* far more often than by coercion.

Table 2 lists these land grabs. The table contains 76 distinct cases. The asterisks indicate the 26 land grabs that provoked an immediate retaliatory land grab. These cases each contain two land grabs. All but a few of the retaliatory land grabs retook the exact territory that had just been seized. Columns Four and Five indicate the presence of gray area territories: islands (including island-like peninsulas) and ambiguities in land borders. The next section will show that these gray areas make land grabs more likely. Column Six indicates whether the land grab led immediately to war. The final section will show that land grabs lead to war less frequently when striking gray areas.

⁴⁷ Decolonization conflicts between imperial powers and groups representing occupied populations fall outside the scope of this study because they are not conflicts between two existing states. Many of these groups seem to have succeeded at coercing out the colonizing power, which raises questions of whether and why coercion was more successful in these conflicts.

⁴⁸ Arguments can be made for the Spanish decision to cede Western Sahara in 1975 to Morocco and Mauritania and the Soviet withdrawal from portions of Iran in 1946. I code the former as a land grab due to the Green March and the latter as non-coercive.

Table 1: Coerced Territorial Cessions, 1918-2014

Year	Target	Coercer	Territory
1922	Britain	Turkey	Constantinople; Eastern Thrace
1935	China	Japan	Hebei; Chahar
1937	France (Syria)	Turkey	Hatay (Alexandretta)
1937	Soviet Union	Japan	Amur River Islands
1938	Czechoslovakia	Germany	Sudetenland
1938	Czechoslovakia	Hungary	Southern Slovakia
1938	Czechoslovakia	Poland	Teschen
1939	Lithuania	Germany	Memel
1940	Romania	Soviet Union	Bessarabia; Northern Bukovina
1940	Romania	Bulgaria	Southern Dobruja
1940	Romania	Hungary	Northern Transylvania
1963	Netherlands	Indonesia	West Irian (West New Guinea)

Table 2: Land Grabs, 1918-2014

Year	Land Grab		Island or Peninsula	Ambiguity in Land Border	War	Territory
	AGAINST	BY				
1919	Russia	Romania				Bessarabia
1919	Russia*	Finland				East Karelia (p)
1920	Russia	Poland			X	Ukraine (p); Belarus (p); Lithuania (p)
1920	Lithuania	Poland			X	Vilnius
1921	Panama*	Costa Rica		X		Coto
1921	Albania	Yugoslavia			X	Northern Albania
1923	Greece	Italy	X			Corfu
1928	Bolivia*	Paraguay		X		Chaco (p)
1931	China	Japan			X	Manchuria
1932	Paraguay*	Bolivia		X	X	Chaco (p)
1932	Colombia*	Peru				Leticia
1933	Saudi Arabia	Yemen			X	Najran
1937	Japan	Russia	X			Amur River Islands
1938	Japan	Russia		X		Changkufeng
1939	Russia*	Japan		X	X	Nomonhan
1939	Finland	Russia			X	Karelia (p); Salla (p); Rybachi; Gulf Islands
1941	Britain	Japan	NA		X	Malaysia; Burma; Hong Kong
1941	Netherlands	Japan	NA		X	Dutch East Indies
1941	United States	Japan	NA		X	Philippines; Guam; Wake Island
1941	Ecuador*	Peru		X		Marañón
1954	Cambodia	Thailand				Preah Vihear
1954	Japan	South Korea	X			Dokdo (Takeshima) Islands
1956	Egypt	Israel	X		X	Sinai; Gaza
1957	Honduras*	Nicaragua				Mocoron
1958	Sudan	Egypt		X		Hala'ib Triangle
1959	China*	India		X		Longju
1959	India	China		X		Ladakh-Aksai Chin border region (p)

* The land grab provoked an immediate retaliatory land grab

(p) The land grab seized part of the named territory

NA The sweeping scale of Japan's 1941 attacks defies classification

Table 2: Land Grabs, 1918-2014 (continued)

Year	Land Grab		Island or Peninsula	Ambiguity in Land Border	War	Territory
	AGAINST	BY				
1961	Portugal	India				Goa
1962	China*	India		X	X	Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh borders (p)
1963	Algeria	Morocco		X		Colomb-Bechar; Tindouf
1965	India*	Pakistan		X		Rann of Kutch (p)
1965	India	Pakistan			X	Akhnur
1966	Guyana	Venezuela	X			Ankoko Island
1967	Egypt	Israel	X		X	Sinai; Gaza
1967	Jordan	Israel			X	West Bank
1967	Syria	Israel			X	Golan Heights
1969	Uruguay	Argentina	X			Punta Bauza
1969	Russia	China	X			Damansky (Zhenbao) Island
1969	Kuwait	Iraq				Strip of land near Umm Qasr
1971	UAE	Iran	X			Abu Musa; G. and L. Tunbs
1973	Israel	Egypt	X		X	Sinai (p)
1973	Israel	Syria			X	Golan Heights (p)
1974	China*	South Vietnam	X			Paracel Islands
1974	Cyprus	Turkey			X	Northern Cyprus
1975	Vietnam*	Cambodia	X			Phu Quoc; Tho Chu; Poulo Wai
1975	Spain	Morocco				Western Sahara
1977	Ethiopia*	Somalia			X	Ogaden
1978	Tanzania	Uganda			X	Kagera Salient
1979	Vietnam	Cambodia			X	Ha Tien, adjacent areas
1980	Iran	Iraq			X	Khuzestan
1981	Peru*	Ecuador				Cordillera del Condor (p)
1982	Britain*	Argentina	X		X	Falkland (Malvinas) Islands
1983	Chad*	Nigeria	X			Islands in Lake Chad
1983	China, Vietnam	Malaysia	X			Spratly Islands (p)

* The land grab provoked an immediate retaliatory land grab

(p) The land grab seized part of the named territory

Table 2: Land Grabs, 1918-2014 (continued)

Year	Land Grab		Island or Peninsula	Ambiguity in Land Border	War	Territory
	AGAINST	BY				
1984	Pakistan	India		X		Siachen
1984	Thailand	Laos		X		Three-Village Border Region
1984	China*	India		X		Thag La
1985	Burkina Faso	Mali		X		Agacher Strip
1986	Bahrain	Qatar	X			Fasht al-Dibal
1987	India	China		X		Thag La (Sumdurong Chu)
1987	Laos*	Thailand		X		Three-Village Border Region
1987	Cameroon	Nigeria	X			Islands in Lake Chad
1988	Vietnam*	China	X			Spratly Islands (p)
1992	Azerbaijan	Armenia			X	Nagorno-Karabakh, adjacent regions
1993	Nigeria	Cameroon	X			Diamant; Jabane
1994	Philippines	China	X			Spratly Islands (p)
1995	Sudan	Egypt		X		Hala'ib Triangle
1995	Peru*	Ecuador				Cenepa (p)
1995	Eritrea*	Yemen	X			Hanish Islands
1996	Turkey*	Greece	X			Imia (Kardak); Akroghalia
1998	Ethiopia*	Eritrea		X	X	Badme
1999	India*	Pakistan				Kargil
2002	Spain*	Morocco	X			Parsley (Perejil) Island
2007	Eritrea	Ethiopia		X		Badme (p)
2010	Costa Rica	Nicaragua	X			Calero Island (p)
2014	Ukraine	Russia	X			Crimea

* The land grab provoked an immediate retaliatory land grab

(p) The land grab seized part of the named territory

When Argentina took the Falkland Islands from Britain in 1981, it did so in a surprise *fait accompli*. When Britain resolved to regain the islands, it demanded their return. Argentina refused. British forces then retook the islands in an invasion of its own while carefully avoiding attacks on Argentina itself, even on Argentinean naval vessels in port. When India confronted Portugal with demands for the enclave of Goa – demands backed by an overwhelming advantage in military power in the region – the Portuguese government refused, holding its ground and ordering its forces to fight to the bitter end. After giving up on threats, India occupied Goa in 1961.⁴⁹ These examples illustrate the broader pattern.

Whereas land grabs occurred at a relatively steady rate in the 1918-2014 period, nine of the twelve coerced cessions form a cluster. Coercion appears to have been unusually effective in the international climate that existed between 1937 and 1940, particularly in Eastern Europe. With the threat of major war and outright conquest weighing on the calculations these states, concessions were made that may not have been granted in other periods. Czechoslovakia and Romania were the primary victims, each accounting for three of the twelve cessions.

Land grabs vary in whether or not they lead to war. Disregarding retaliatory land grabs, 27 (of 76) land grabs erupted into wars (36%). This rate of war aligns with the conceptualization of the *fait accompli* as a calculated risk. Because it is difficult to accurately perceive how much loss the adversary will tolerate, states will sometimes overreach and provoke a strong response. The rate at which land grabs lead to war has declined over time, a trend that is consistent with the general decline in the frequency of interstate war.

None of the coerced cessions led to immediate war. This is consistent with established theories in which the success of coercion equates to the achievement of a war-avoiding bargain.⁵⁰ However, most of the coerced cessions occurred during the turmoil that led up to the Second World War. That war would soon reverse many of these cessions.

Coercion and the *fait accompli* are not the only ways that territory changes hands. The two are the primary adversarial means by which states acquire territory at each other's expense without going to war. They are the two ways to make gains in the thick of crises. Nonetheless, territory also changes hands at the ends of wars and – quite frequently – through negotiated agreements. Could these negotiated agreements be coercion?

To address this question, I examined all territorial cessions since 1918 irrespective of whether the cases appear as conflicts (compellent threats, crises, disputes, or wars) in the standard conflict datasets. I found that negotiated agreements to cede territory tend to occur years after a crisis or dispute – if any crisis or militarized dispute occurred at all – and without anything resembling an explicit compellent threat. They therefore fail to meet the definitional requirement. Even if coercion occurred,

⁴⁹ Goncalves 2013.

⁵⁰ Fearon 1995.

it is qualitatively distinct from the sort of crisis bargaining in, for instance, the Munich Crisis. Moreover, the winning side often prevailed due to a favorable ruling by an international legal institution or arbitrator after a prolonged process of deliberation, which is not suggestive of coercion. The three strongest candidates for latent coercion are the Spanish cession of Ifni to Morocco, the Israeli return of the Sinai to Egypt, and the British relinquishment of Hong Kong to China. Beyond those three, it becomes difficult to find cases where a convincing argument exists for latent coercion determining the outcome.

There are a number of ways to parse the exact ratio of land grabs to coerced cessions. For instance, is it fair to compare coerced cessions to land grabs that successfully occupied territory but then failed to retain lasting control without provoking war? Should retaliatory land grabs be included? The codings for certain cases might also be questioned. Nonetheless, even if different coding rules were used to produce a ratio less uneven than 102 to 12, the bottom line would remain unchanged. Although coercion (compellence) has received far more attention than the *fait accompli* in the International Relations literature, the land grab is the predominant means short of war through which states wrest territories from their adversaries.

Gray Areas and Land Grabs

Given the importance of land grabs, it is necessary to explain the conditions under which they are likely to occur. This section assesses the first hypothesis – a disputed territory is more likely to be seized in a land grab if it is a gray area – as well as control variables representing established explanations for similar forms of interstate conflict. I first show that nearly two-thirds of all land grabs since 1918 struck gray areas. I then focus on territorial crises with and without land grabs to see how useful gray areas are in explaining that variation. 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.

Of the 73 distinct land grabs in Table 2 (i.e., disregarding retaliatory land grabs), 25 struck islands or island-like peninsulas and 21 struck border ambiguities, for a total of 46 striking gray areas (63%). This tendency is particularly pronounced since the early 1980s; almost every land grab since then has targeted a gray area.⁵¹ Because gray areas are niche types of territories – there are innumerable similarly-sized border territories along well-defined borders – this figure is suggestive of a link between gray areas and land grabs.

⁵¹ This change may be concomitant with the decline in the rate of interstate war – and interstate wars over territory in particular. Because land grabs against non-gray-area territories so often lead to war, the same explanations for why states have shown less inclination to fight each other over time may apply to an increased aversion to war-prone land grabs. A related explanation is the growing strength of the territorial integrity norm, which could place a premium on targeting gray areas – especially border ambiguities – rather than more unmistakably violating the norm. Fazal 2011, 53 finds strong support for the growth of this norm and suggests that limited territorial incursions might be less threatening to it than invasions producing state deaths. Zacher 2001, 237 dates the institutionalization phase of the territorial integrity norm as beginning in 1976.

Explaining the conditions that make land grabs more likely requires variation in whether or not land grabs occur. Therefore, I shift from examining all land grabs to now examine all interstate crises over territory from 1918 to 2007. The data show a striking pattern of land grabs targeting gray areas, as Table 3 summarizes.

Table 3: Gray Areas and Land Grabs in Territorial Crises

	No Land Grab	Land Grab	% Land Grab
No Gray Area	58	28	33%
Gray Area	19	41	68%
% Gray Area	25%	59%	

Statistical analysis confirms what Table 3 suggests: the existence of a strongly positive correlation between gray areas and land grabs in territorial crises. Table 4 presents coefficients and standard errors from logit models with standard errors clustered by crisis. Column One presents the relationship between gray areas and land grabs in isolation. Column Two adds control variables for characteristics of the deterrer: power status, nuclear weapons, and regime type. Column Three adds these same control variables taking into account the characteristics of the challenger. Column Four includes the second set of control variables, which capture aspects of the value of the territories at the price of losing some observations due to missing data. The correlation between gray areas and land grabs remains similar, substantively strong, and statistically significant across the four models.⁵²

⁵² In all models and as discussed above, I omit crisis actors for the following reasons: 1) secondary crisis actors, 2) intra-war crises, 3) non-territorial issues, 4) extended deterrence, 5) territorial conflicts over the full territory of one of the crisis actors, and 6) cases where the adversary already occupies the disputed territory. For the fourth, fifth, and sixth, it is possible to re-run the analysis without each exclusion in turn. In all three instances, the results remain similar. The results are robust to dropping all retaliatory land grabs, most of which are already omitted by the sixth exclusion criterion.

Table 4: Regression Results: Gray Areas and Land Grabs

	(1) Bivariate	(2) Deterrer Characteristics	(3) Dyadic Characteristics	(4) Territory Value
Gray Area	1.50 (.43)***	1.50 (.44)***	1.31 (.47)***	1.51 (.60)**
Power		.03 (.24)	-.10 (.30)	-.27 (.35)
Challenger Power			-.46 (.22)**	-.76 (.31)**
Both Great Powers			1.38 (.80)*	1.96 (1.12)*
Nuclear		-.15 (.67)	-.26 (.68)	-.89 (.79)
Dictatorship		-.17 (.44)	-.06 (.54)	-.01 (.62)
Challenger Dictatorship			-.68 (.70)	-.59 (.74)
Both Democracies			.03 (1.03)	-.44 (1.16)
Strategic Value				.37 (.64)
Economic Value				1.32 (.60)**
Ethnic Value				-.08 (.66)
Constant	-.73 (.27)***	-.72 (.57)	.76 (1.19)	.68 (1.39)
N	146	141	136	112

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

Figure 2: The Effect of Gray Areas

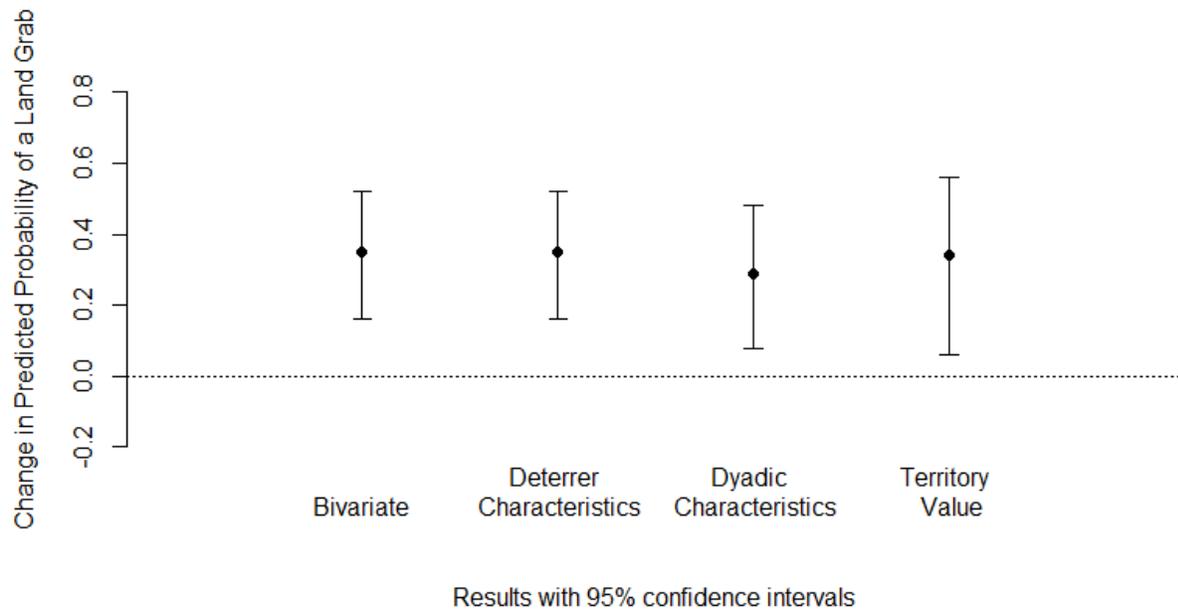


Figure 2 illustrates the main results of each model using predicted probabilities. It displays the substantive effect of changing from a non-gray-area territory to a gray area on the predicted probability of a land grab. All other variables are held at their median values. The results correspond to the statistical models in Table 4. In all four models, a gray area increases the predicted probability of a land grab by approximately 30%. For the Territory Value model, which utilizes the full array of control variables, the increase is from 33% to 67%.

On the whole, the control variables fare poorly at explaining land grabs. Territorial crises pitting great powers against each other are somewhat more likely to feature a land grab. More surprisingly, power asymmetries that favor the challenger against a weaker (non-great power) deterrer correlate with a lower incidence of land grabs. The prior expectation is for the opposite result. Nuclear weapons possession and regime type produce no statistically significant associations. The lack of a democratic peace effect for land grabs is surprising but may simply result from the rarity of territorial crises between democracies.

The first question that these results raise is whether land grabs tend to strike gray areas simply because these gray area territories are smaller and less valuable. The intrinsic value of territories is assessed using the Huth and Allee variables (Column Four) on strategic, economic, and ethnic value of disputed territories. I first examined the relationship between value and gray areas (not shown). As expected, gray areas do correlate with lower levels of economic and ethnic value, though not lower strategic value. However, of the three, only economic value correlates with land grabs (as shown in Table 4). Including it in the model does not weaken the association between gray areas and land grabs. On reflection, the weakness of the relationships between territorial value and land grabs is less surprising than it may seem. Although a more valuable territory increases the motivation of the challenger to take the territory, that value also increases the motivation (and therefore credibility) of the deterrer to defend it. The net effect that one should expect to observe, if any, is not apparent.

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 so few land grabs seizing small pieces of territory across precisely-defined land borders?

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 nonetheless transgressed. The hypotheses imply 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 relevant focal point (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 in a military coup.⁵³ The next section returns to the subject of the consequences of seizing a 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 all the time. 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 *fait accompli* as small gray area territories. Yet the Kargil operation is an aberration.

Another potential inferential concern is that states claim borders are ambiguous when they want to dispute them. If so, the dispute creates the ambiguity rather than results from it. States that wish to contest a border certainly do have an incentive to contrive an ambiguity in it. This potential endogeneity is both a measurement problem and an inference problem. Proper measurement mitigates the problem by distinguishing between preexisting ambiguities and contrived claims. In many cases in the data, states resent and contest a border without claiming it is poorly delimited or demarcated. The measurement requirement for the ambiguity to exist for at least a decade before the crisis aids in this regard. Moreover, even after separating out the island and ambiguity gray areas as two separate explanatory variables, both remain substantively and statistically predictors of land grabs.⁵⁴ Unlike ambiguities, islands are an aspect of physical geography and therefore exogenous. The similarity in the roles of islands and ambiguities in these crises provides further evidence in favor of the theory.

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 are crises precisely because of the tensions surrounding a land grab. This potential selection effect is important because it means that gray areas likely lead to land grabs much less often in general than in crises. For instance, there are innumerable small islands. Most crises over small islands include 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 deterrence (i.e., not just in crises), the results only shed light on 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.

Gray Areas, Land Grabs, and War

This section evaluates the relationships between gray areas, land grabs, and the onset of war. The results include the presence of a correlation between land grabs and war but the absence of a correlation between gray areas and war. However, the main finding emerges from assessing the

⁵³ Malik 2012.

⁵⁴ The island variable falls just short of significance in the model corresponding to Column Four of Table 4, but it remains significant in the other three models.

interaction effect between gray areas and land grabs. Land grabs that strike gray areas are correlated with a lower risk of war in comparison to other land grabs. States are better able to get away with these land grabs. This finding directly supports Hypothesis Two.

Table 5 summarizes the relationships between gray areas, land grabs, and the onset of war, with war as the dependent variable. I again use a logit model with standard errors clustered by crisis. The first column evaluates the effect of a gray area in isolation. Due to posttreatment bias once land grabs are included, it is the best model for evaluating that explanatory variable alone. The second column adds land grabs into the model. It enables the evaluation of the average unconditional effect of land grabs on the probability of war. The third column incorporates an interaction term between gray areas and land grabs, which allows for the main result. The fourth column presents the same model with added controls taking into account adversary characteristics.

The results are as follows. The first column shows that there is no statistical association between gray areas and war. I discuss how to interpret this result – and whether it weighs against the theory – later in this section. The second column supports the literature’s existing assumption – and my assertion as well – that *faits accomplis* are a risky crisis tactic strongly associated with an increased likelihood of war. Recall that Van Evera labeled the *fait accompli* as a “halfway step to war.” His claim is accurate. All else equal, a land grab increases the predicted probability of war in a territorial crisis from 2% to 44%.⁵⁵

However, just as the literature has not previously explored the conditions under which *faits accomplis* are more likely to occur, it also has not yet explained the conditions under which *faits accomplis* are more likely to lead to war. The third and fourth columns contain an interaction term between gray areas and land grabs, which makes it possible to distinguish land grabs striking gray areas from land grabs striking other territories. For ease of interpretation, I evaluate the implications using the predicted probabilities in Figure 3.

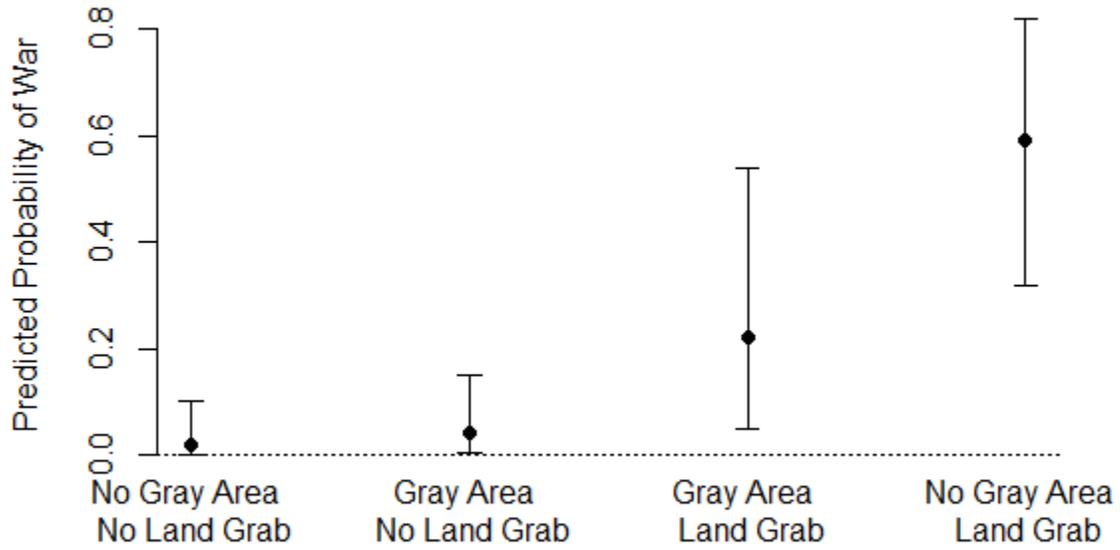
⁵⁵ Results generated from the model in Column Two of Table 5.

Table 5: Gray Areas, Land Grabs and the Likelihood of War

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Gray Area	.00 (.59)	-1.13 (.80)	1.50 (1.31)	.87 (1.29)
Land Grab Against		3.96 (.90)***	4.91 (1.05)***	4.75 (.91)***
Gray Area & Land Grab			-3.07 (1.53)**	-2.67 (1.41)*
Power	-.30 (.40)	-.24 (.55)	-.24 (.56)	-.32 (.45)
Challenger Power	-.68 (.32)**	-.38 (.48)	-.36 (.51)	-.26 (.43)
Both Great Powers	1.56 (.99)	.97 (2.12)	.85 (1.43)	1.61 (1.28)
Nuclear	-1.39 (1.14)	-.92 (1.51)	-.62 (1.29)	-1.17 (1.11)
Dictatorship	-.70 (.66)	-1.21 (.88)	-1.43 (.92)	-1.00 (.85)
Challenger Dictatorship	-.63 (.76)	-.34 (.84)	-.45 (.88)	-.25 (.80)
Both Democracies	-2.60 (1.53)*	-3.38 (1.77)*	-3.85 (1.90)**	-2.62 (1.58)*
Strategic Value	1.00 (.71)	1.18 (.77)	1.14 (.74)	
Economic Value	.60 (.61)	.024 (.86)	-.02 (.80)	
Ethnic Value	-.21 (.66)	-.14 (1.16)	-.26 (.86)	
Constant	1.01 (1.66)	-1.34 (1.88)	-1.70 (2.09)	-1.93 (1.96)
N	112	112	112	136

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

Figure 3: Gray Areas, Land Grabs, and the Predicted Probability of War



Results with 95% Confidence Intervals

Figure 3 displays the predicted probability of war for each possible combination of the presence or absence of gray areas and land grabs, holding all other variables at their median values. As Figure 3 illustrates, the predicted probability that a land grab leads to war climbs from 22% to 59% depending only on whether the seized territory was a gray area. This is the main result of the section. Without a land grab, the predicted probability of war in territorial crises is less than 5%. Land grabs are an essential part of whether territorial crises escalate to war.

The control variables, in contrast, fare poorly at explaining war. Power status, nuclear weapons possession, and the three dimensions of the intrinsic value of the territories each fail to correlate strongly with whether the crisis ends in war. The one notable exception, in line with past research, is the presence of a democratic peace in territorial crises, with crises between two democracies less likely to lead to war.

Among all land grabs from 1918 to 2014 – not just those during territorial crises – the relationship between gray areas, land grabs, and war is apparent. Land grabs striking non-gray territories lead to war 59% of the time, whereas land grabs provoke war much less often – 17% of the time – when the territory is a gray area.

Table 6: When Do Land Grabs Lead to War?

	No War	War	% War
No Gray Area	11	16	59%
Gray Area	38	8	17%
% Gray Area	78%	33%	

There are two plausible interpretations of the land grabs that occur despite the lack of a gray area and that lead to war.⁵⁶ 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 uphold a red line without any gray areas against violations. Pakistan's operation in Kargil offers a possible example. 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, the Cyprus War, and the Arab-Israeli wars all seem to better fit this latter view. If so, these land grabs were decisions to start a war, not *fait accompli* attempts. A *fait accompli* requires, by definition, the strategic intention to attempt to get away with a limited gain without provoking escalation. The results presented here do not enable a determination as to which explanation is correct; this requires additional evidence regarding intentions. Either way, the results sustain the theory's prediction that challengers generally cannot and do not "get away" with land grabs that strike non-gray-area territories. The unanswered question is whether these challengers knew this when embarking on their land grabs.

But what to make of the lack of a correlation between gray areas and war? Recall from the discussion of the hypotheses that the predicted relationship between red lines and war is indeterminate. The first hypothesis conjectures that gray areas make war more likely through one mechanism: making *faits accomplis* more likely. Because *faits accomplis* make war more likely, in itself this means gray areas should make war more likely. However, the second hypothesis posits a different mechanism that cuts in the other direction: *faits accomplis* striking gray areas should be less likely to provoke war. Figure 4 illustrates how the two mechanisms counterbalance each other.

In Figure 4, the first column shows the predicted probability of land grabs for gray area territories versus other territories: 67% versus 33%.⁵⁷ The second column looks within these land grabs and displays how often they lead to war: 22% of land grabs lead to war for gray areas versus 59% for other territories.⁵⁸ Gray area territories are more likely to lead to a land grab, but each land grab that strikes a gray area is individually less likely to lead to war. Those two mechanisms offset with the end result that the predicted probability of war in territorial crises is approximately 16% for gray area territories and other territories alike.⁵⁹

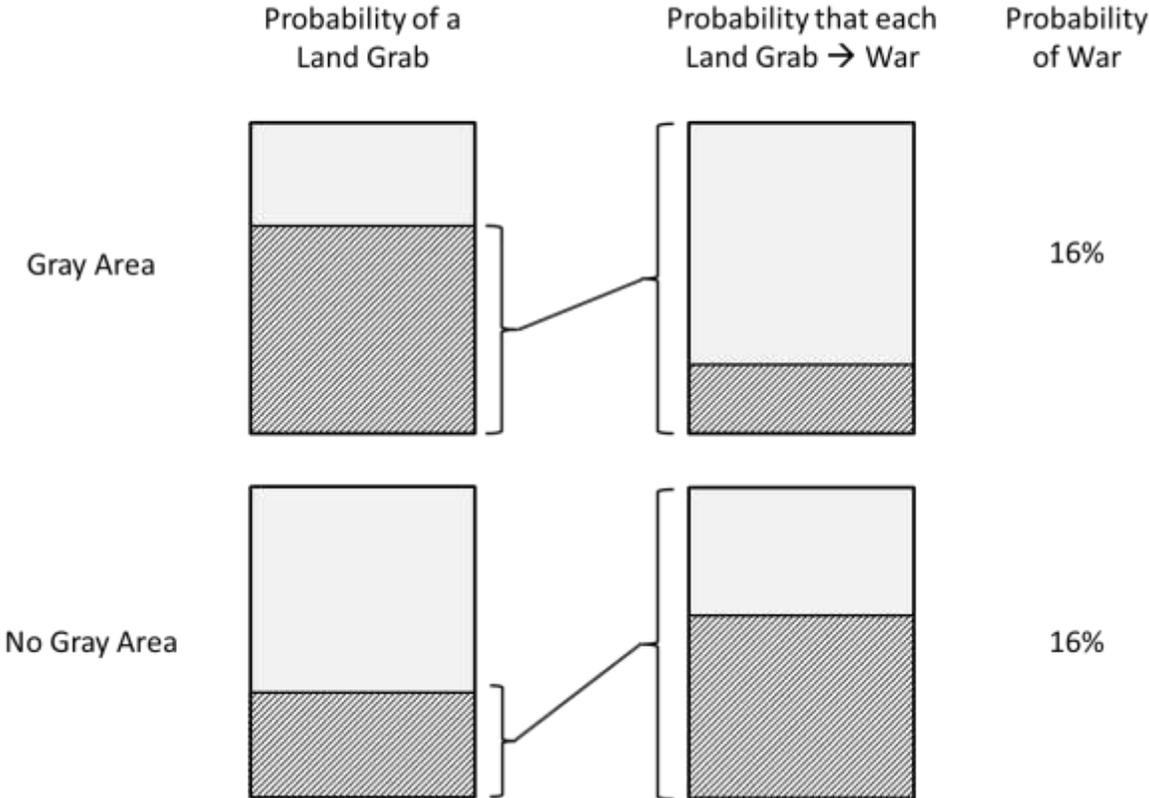
⁵⁶ A potential concern is that incurring enough casualties to reach the threshold for war is more difficult in island disputes for purely military reasons. States may lack the naval capacity to fight over islands or to land large numbers of ground forces on them. Although the water barrier does not appear 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.

⁵⁷ Results generated from the model in Column Four of Table 4.

⁵⁸ Results generated from the model in Column Four of Table 5.

⁵⁹ Results generated from the model in Column One of Table 5.

Figure 4: The Two Offsetting Mechanisms Connecting Gray Areas and War in Territorial Crises



Far from having no relationship with the likelihood of war, gray areas have two potent connections to it. However, because the mechanisms push in opposite directions, there is no net correlation between gray areas and war. These two mechanisms embody the main findings: gray areas make land grabs more likely to occur, but gray areas also make land grabs less likely to escalate to war.

Conclusion

The traditional way to understand crises is to suppose that statesmen approach them by asking themselves the question, “What can we do to convince the other side that we are willing to fight in order to get them to back down?” Crises, from this standpoint, are about signaling resolve. Making gains is a matter of coercing concessions. This paper has approached crises as if statesmen ask themselves a different guiding question, “What can we get away with taking unilaterally without starting a war?” This perspective places the *fait accompli* and the deterrent red line front and center as pivotal crisis tactics. Understanding red lines and *faits accomplis* is vital to understanding how crises will unfold, which side will win, and whether war will result.

The paper presented a theory explaining why gray areas in deterrent red lines make *faits accomplis* more likely to succeed without provoking war and therefore more likely to occur. The results support the theory. Most territorial gains are made by *fait accompli*. Most land grabs strike gray areas, especially since the 1980s. Most of the land grabs that target other territories provoke wars.

The paper also raises a more fundamental question for the field to consider going forward: What does the prevalence of *faits accomplis* relative to coerced concessions mean for existing theories of crisis bargaining and the causes of war? Since Fearon’s seminal article, the onset of war has been increasingly conceived as the result of a failure to reach a war-averting coercive bargain in which one sides gives up enough that the other no longer prefers a costly war to a peaceful bargain.⁶⁰ Therefore, the empirical rarity of coerced bargains in the issue area most associated with the causes of war (territory) would seem to be a problem.

However, the rarity of coerced territorial cessions does not in itself undermine bargaining theories of war because a *fait accompli* can be understood as a type of tacit bargain. If the requisite war-avoiding concession must occur, it can just as well take the form of a *fait accompli* and a decision not to escalate in response.⁶¹

Even as it does not undermine the underlying premise of bargaining theories of war, the rarity of coerced concessions does raise questions about the role of signaling in crisis bargaining. Because this literature regards uncertainty as a primary cause of bargaining failure and war, it places a heavy

⁶⁰ Fearon 1995; Wagner 2000.

⁶¹ Fearon 1995, 394 & 405 explicitly models war-avoiding bargains as *faits accomplis*, unlike much of this literature.

emphasis on crisis signaling, usually signals of resolve.⁶² This line of reasoning has even been used to explain the democratic peace.⁶³ However, signals of resolve do not seem to intimidate states into making territorial concessions with any regularity, and signals can be unnecessary for a *fait accompli* to succeed.

Does the rarity of coerced concessions call into question the importance of traditional crisis signals like shows of force and public statements of commitment? The answer depends on why coercion so rarely produces gains. One potential explanation is that states are unable to find signals costly enough (or otherwise credible enough) to convince adversaries of their resolve. If so, a unilateral *fait accompli* is required in order to make the gain. A second – and very different – explanation is that the element of surprise may be so tactically advantageous for *faits accomplis* that challengers forgo the signals and explicit demands necessary to coerce concessions. A third possibility is that the decision to attempt coercion rather than impose a *fait accompli* screens out the most resolute challengers, crippling the credibility of subsequent coercive threats.⁶⁴ In other words, if the threat is sincere, why did the challenger not simply take the territory at the outset? The absence of an initial *fait accompli* may function as a signal of weakness that supersedes ensuing signals of resolve. This would leave challengers with a choice between a *fait accompli* and a threat without credibility. If validated, each of these three unitary rationalist explanations for the rarity of coerced concessions would undercut the significance of traditional crisis signals of resolve, albeit in quite different ways.

However, other possible explanations are less damaging. Perhaps leaders sensitive to their domestic political audience find it less humiliating to lose territory to unilateral adversary action than to actively participate in a capitulation? Alternatively, perhaps states can better persist in denying the legitimacy of a territorial loss if it occurs by *fait accompli* than if they consent to it (even if under threat)? These two possibilities would raise fewer questions about the role of traditional crisis signals.

More research is necessary to establish why coerced concessions are so rare in territorial conflicts and what it means for theories of coercive bargaining and the causes of war. Regardless, future theoretical models of crises and the onset of war can better represent reality by explicitly integrating *faits accomplis*. Doing so requires an understanding of when *faits accomplis* are likely to occur and when they likely lead to war. Gray areas in deterrent red lines offer one important part of the answers to these questions.

⁶² E.g., Fearon 1994; Fearon 1997; Slantchev 2011.

⁶³ Schultz 1998.

⁶⁴ My thanks to James Fearon for suggesting this explanation.

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