

# **The Evolution of Territorial Conquest after 1945: Whither the Norm of Territorial Integrity?**

Dan Altman

Assistant Professor of Political Science  
Georgia State University

**\*\*\*All Results Are Preliminary\*\*\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Past studies conclude that a norm of territorial integrity caused territorial conquest to decline sharply after 1945, virtually subsiding after 1975. However, subtle decisions about dataset scope obscured the continued prevalence smaller conquests. Introducing new and more comprehensive data on territorial conquest attempts since 1918, this study presents a revised history of conquest after 1945. More than they declined in frequency, conquests shrank in size and evolved in nature. Challengers attempting conquest before 1945 often started a war, then attempted to occupy large territories. Today, challengers seize smaller regions, then attempt to avoid war. Challengers adopting this strategy, the fait accompli, more often target territories with characteristics that reduce the risk of provoking war – such as the absence of a defending military garrison – but nonetheless take a calculated gamble. Because war-prone conquest declined while “war-averse” conquest did not, the operative constraint appears to be against war-prone aggression, not territorial revision per se. Most of the evidence that the norm of territorial integrity suppressed conquest withers under close investigation with comprehensive data. Attempts to get away with seizing small pieces of territory project to be a defining element of the 21<sup>st</sup> century international security landscape.*

## **Introduction**

Is conquest obsolete? How rare has territorial conquest become? Because conquest recurred as a central element of warfare for most of human history, those questions raise another: have the causes of war changed? Past studies reach a remarkable degree of consensus about the history of conquest since 1945. These studies report that conquests of entire states virtually ceased after the Second World War. Smaller conquests declined sharply after 1945 before nearly ending altogether after 1975. Consequently, wars of conquest became rare after 1975, marking a historic change in the causes of interstate war. A strengthening norm of territorial integrity – a shared social understanding that is impermissible to take territory by force – is thought to be the principal reason for these declines of conquest and war. The international community is believed to now more frequently intervene to uphold that norm. Due to those interventions, the few attempts at conquest that still occur rarely succeed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zacher 2001; Fazal 2011; Atzili 2012; Pinker 2012; Goertz et al. 2016; Hathaway and Shapiro 2017.

This consensus history of the decline of conquest seems at odds with the array of territorial conflicts confronting the world today. The days of German armies marching on Paris are over, but Russia's 2014 invasion of the Crimean Peninsula demonstrated that the world has not seen the last of conquest, not even in Europe. Alarmed by events in Ukraine, NATO began to increase its presence in the Baltic in order to deter a similar operation in, for instance, the Estonian border town of Narva (Freeman 2015). In Asia, the possibility of a Chinese seizure of islands in the Senkakus (from Japan) or the Spratlys (from Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, or Taiwan) ranks among the most likely crisis scenarios going forward. The prospect of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan constitutes one of the most worrisome pathways to major war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. China's border with India remains contested. Potential territorial wars seem to span the globe, including festering disputes between India and Pakistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Sudan and South Sudan, and more. Are these fears misplaced?

New and more comprehensive data on territorial conquest makes it possible to re-examine this gap between scholarly research documenting the decline of conquest and popular perceptions of the enduring threat of conquest. The Modern Conquest dataset consists of 151 conquest attempts from 1918 to 2017.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on these data, this study lays out a revised history of territorial conquest after 1945 in order to come to a new understanding of conquest in the world today. This revised history diverges from the academic consensus to a surprising extent. Despite the existence of six major empirical studies using three different datasets to document the decline of conquest, only the first of the six principal findings summarized in the opening paragraph finds clear support in the new data. Modern conquest differs markedly from conquest before 1945 in size, location, and underlying political strategy, but smaller conquests have proven far more persistent than past studies have recognized. More than it declined, conquest evolved.

In earlier eras, conquest and warfare seemed naturally to belong together. The sequence of conquest often went: initiate war, then try to take territory. Today, the predominant sequence looks different: seize a small piece of territory, then try to avoid war. This strategy, the *fait accompli*, has become the primary strategy of conquest.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, war-prone forms of conquest declined earlier and more sharply than other forms of conquest. Attempts to conquer entire states – the most war-

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<sup>2</sup> By including the interwar era as a prior period, data back to 1918 suffices for the task of better understanding conquest after 1945. I leave to others the evolutions of conquest before this modern period.

<sup>3</sup> On the *fait accompli*: Tarar 2016; Altman 2017.

prone form of conquest – declined immediately after 1945. Past studies ably document this.<sup>4</sup> However, contra past studies, Modern Conquest data reveal the lack of a corresponding decline in smaller “war-averse” conquests. These are conquests of territories with characteristics that reduce the risk of provoking war. Attempts to conquer territories far smaller than entire states – generally one province or less in size – remained common after 1945. By the 1980s, even conquest attempts targeting small territories with attributes that heighten the probability of war – populated territories and garrisoned territories – became rare. By the 1990s, conquest attempts seizing unpopulated territories came to outnumber those taking populated regions for the first time in modern history. Similarly, seizing undefended areas now occurs more often than seizing areas that require confronting a military garrison.

Past studies have inferred a constraint against conquest – the norm of territorial integrity – and used it to explain the decline of war. Yet why, then, have territorial revisions with less risk of provoking war persisted? Rather than the decline of conquest causing the decline of war, the evidence better supports a reversal of the causal arrow: the decline of war caused the decline of war-prone forms of conquest. The operative constraint is against war-prone behavior, not territorial revision. Nonetheless, although states attempting conquest now generally limit their ambitions to reduce the likelihood of provoking war, that risk is not zero. Argentina did not expect its 1982 seizure of the Falkland Islands to cause war; nor Pakistan its 1999 encroachments in the Kargil region of Kashmir (Freedman 2005, 187; Ganguly 2016, 36). Because some would-be conquerors miscalculate what they can get away with taking, territorial wars have retained their status as the predominant type of interstate warfare. Indeed, this specific chain of events – a miscalculated attempt to seize a small disputed territory by *fait accompli* – accounts for a remarkable proportion of interstate wars since 1945.

These revisions to the history of conquest matter for several reasons. First, if conquest has become as rare as past studies suggest, then research on territorial conflict would be of merely historical interest more than current interest. By documenting the persistence of both conquest and territorial war, this study makes the case for the continued need to study territorial conflict.<sup>5</sup> Second, scholars working on any aspect of territorial conflict can use the description of modern conquest in this study as a basis for assessing whether and how their findings apply to conquest today versus, for instance, only

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<sup>4</sup> For the most thorough examination, see Fazal (2011).

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly important for the research tradition that approaches the question of the causes of war by emphasizing the issues over which states fight – as opposed, for instance, to the balance of power (Senese and Vasquez 2008).

pertaining to conquest before 1945. Third, by describing the strategy and characteristics of modern conquest, the study contributes to understanding how states might manage future territorial conflicts that threaten to erupt into wars. Finally, by challenging the evidence supporting the prevailing explanation for the decline of conquest – the norm of territorial integrity – the study contributes to better understanding the causes of war in the modern era.

It is, nonetheless, important to acknowledge that no single article can provide a comprehensive history of conquest. Most importantly, this study does not fully treat the question of the motives for conquest; that is, why certain states desire even small pieces of territory enough to seize them.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it focuses on the question of whether some constraint – such as a norm of territorial integrity or an alternative constraint against war initiation – has been the primary cause of conquest’s evolution and decline. Consequently, the study only briefly engages with the processes of decolonization and secession that intersect so clearly with some of the motives for revising inherited borders after 1945. Nor does it address the distinctive features of conquest before 1918, an era of imperialism and colonization.

The study begins by reviewing the existing scholarly consensus about the decline of territorial conquest after World War II. Second, it compares the Modern Conquest dataset to its three predecessors, exploring how subtle decisions about dataset scope generate unexpectedly different histories of conquest. Third, it charts the surprisingly partial nature of the decline of conquest after 1945. Fourth, it shows that territorial war persisted even after conquest virtually ceased to occur according to existing conquest datasets. Fifth, it revisits and casts doubt on the evidence that a strengthening norm of territorial integrity caused historic declines in conquest and interstate war. Sixth, it argues for reversing the causal arrow between the declines of conquest and war. Seventh, it describes how the strategy of conquest evolved as states increasingly came to take territory while trying to avoid a war rather than trying to win one. Eighth, it identifies characteristics of war-averse conquest and uses them to chart the declining war-proneness of conquest attempts. Finally, the study concludes by explaining why small territorial seizures are likely to be a defining element of the 21<sup>st</sup> century international security landscape.

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<sup>6</sup> I am using Modern Conquest data to explore this in a follow-on study.

## The Decline of Territorial Conquest and the Norm of Territorial Integrity

Past studies of territorial conquest report dramatic decline. Conquests of entire states virtually ceased immediately after the Second World War ended in 1945 (Fazal 2011). Only four times since then has a state attempted to conquer and absorb another. North Korea unsuccessfully sought to conquer South Korea in 1950.<sup>7</sup> North Vietnam successfully conquered South Vietnam in 1975. Indonesia invaded and annexed Timor-Leste in 1975, nine days after it declared independence from Portugal (Fernandes 2011). Timor-Leste regained its independence in 2002. Iraq occupied Kuwait in 1990 before losing the Gulf War.

Broadening the lens to include conquests of all sizes, not merely entire states, past studies again describe dramatic decline after 1945 and a further steep decline from 1975 (Zacher 2001; Atzili 2012; Goertz et al. 2016). Goertz et al. (2016, 117) conclude, “Conquests and annexations are significantly less frequent after 1945 than in previous eras to the point that they are virtually nonexistent in the last forty years.” Pinker (2012, 251) affirms, “Zero is also the number of times that any country has conquered even *parts* of some other country since 1975” (emphasis in original). If so, one purpose of this study – describing conquest in the world today – would be essentially fruitless. There would be little to describe.

These conclusions provide tremendous reason for optimism about the improbability of conquest and territorial war going forward. The centrality of territorial conflict to the causes of interstate war has been well documented (e.g., Vasquez and Henehan 2001). But, if conquest has largely subsided, presumably it can no longer function as an integral step toward the onset of most interstate wars. Is territorial conflict no longer the pressing issue for international relations that it has been for time immemorial? The consensus history of conquest would seem to imply just that.

One idea dominates existing explanations of the decline of territorial conquest: a norm of territorial integrity grew stronger after 1945, suppressing conquest (Zacher 2001; Hensel et al. 2009; Fazal 2011; Atzili 2012; Goertz et al. 2016). Fazal characterizes it more narrowly as a norm against conquest. Atzili conceives it more broadly as a norm of border fixity, which encompasses barriers to secession and peaceful border change alongside the constraint against conquest. Pinker (2012) uses the

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<sup>7</sup> The subsequent invasion of North Korea, which prompted Chinese intervention, could qualify as a fifth instance. However, I place such cases within the excluded category of retaliatory conquest attempts (discussed below).

decline of conquest as evidence for the shrinking role of violence in human civilization rooted in long term processes of social progress. Hathaway and Shapiro (2017) apply it as evidence for the efficacy of international law at constraining war. Both studies eschew drawing a clean distinction between their arguments and the norm of territorial integrity.

Acknowledging the existence of a few recent (post-1975) attempts at conquest such as Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, past studies interpret the failure of these attempts as further evidence for the strength of the norm. According to Goertz et al. (2016, 114), "Even in the few instances in which states have recently violated the norm against conquest, the international community has responded in ways that seek to maintain the norm" (also see Atzili 2012, 24-27). Zacher (2001) and Fazal (2011) emphasize the invigorated opposition to conquest, primarily by Western states and frequently operating through international organizations. The coalition that ejected Iraq from Kuwait exemplifies this international reactivity against conquest. Although the international community failed to reverse Russia's annexation of Crimea, the variety of condemnations and sanctions directed at Russia indicate an attempt to do so by means short of force. Even when the norm falters, its force is still felt.

## **Why New Conquest Data Tell a Different Story**

Conquest remained far more common after 1945 – and after 1975 – than is currently believed. Territorial war remained the primary form of interstate war. Meaningful interventions by the international community to reverse conquest attempts happened infrequently and did not reduce the success rate of conquest. Although conquest evolved in fundamental ways, the prevailing history – that the norm of territorial integrity largely vanquished conquest – conflicts with the prevalence of territorial conquest in the world today.

Rather than simply assert this discrepant history without foundation, I begin by detailing why new Modern Conquest data paints such a surprisingly different picture from all six past studies and the three datasets on which they draw: Territorial Change (Tir et al. 1998), Territorial Aggressions (Zacher 2001), and State Deaths (Fazal 2011).<sup>8</sup> I emphasize the former because it is used most often.

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<sup>8</sup> Two other existing datasets can also serve this purpose. Militarized Interstate Disputes data includes conquest attempts mixed among many other types of events (Jones et al. 1996). Prorok and Huth (2015) include original data on forceful territorial changes after 1945 in their study of how international law affects subsequent

Conquest datasets differ first on the fundamental nature of conquest, which can be conceptualized as either a behavior or an outcome. In other words, does conquest need to succeed, at least for a time, to be conquest? Territorial Change and State Deaths regard conquest as an outcome, albeit not an irreversible one. Modern Conquest joins Territorial Aggressions in instead approaching conquest as behavior and thus as an event. To avoid confusion about this, I use the term conquest attempt in lieu of conquest. The Modern Conquest dataset consists of 151 conquest attempts from 1918 to 2017.<sup>9</sup> Some conquest attempts succeed; others fail. It is useful to think of failed attempts at conquest as short-lived conquests. These are cases where states seize territory but fail to hold it, usually losing control after battlefield defeats. Except where otherwise specified, a conquest attempt succeeds if control of the territory persists immediately after the associated militarized dispute, crisis, or war ends.<sup>10</sup>

A conquest attempt occurs when one state deploys a military force to seize disputed territory from another without permission and with the intention to assume lasting control of that territory. Although conquest attempts are forceful assertions of sovereignty over territory, use of the term implies nothing about whether each conquest attempt is normatively legitimate, legal under international law, or recognized as a change in a border by the international community. The definition excludes most cross-border military operations because they lack the intention to assume lasting control.<sup>11</sup> Incursions other than conquest attempts include interventions in civil wars, cross-border raids, peacekeeping missions, and navigation errors by military patrols. The definition also excludes conquests by or against non-state actors. This restriction means that the dataset excludes important cases of secessionist and

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challenges to forceful and negotiated territorial changes. Like Territorial Change data, this list excludes failed attempts at conquest. It offers, however, an unusually complete list of successful conquests.

<sup>9</sup> The Modern Conquest dataset is an updated expansion of Altman's (2017) Land Grabs dataset. It includes new observations and new characteristics of all observations (variables). The procedures for identifying and coding cases are summarized there.

<sup>10</sup> Prior datasets do not specify the amount of time for which a challenger must hold a territory for it to qualify as a (successful) conquest. This engenders confusion about cases like Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in 1990 and Germany's of France in 1940.

<sup>11</sup> I rely primarily the judgment of secondary sources (usually histories) to determine intent along with two simpler indicators from which the secondary sources rarely deviate: 1) the articulation of a claim to the territory and 2) deploying forces to a fixed position in that territory. I include cases where the soldiers removed their uniforms to mask their identity and cases where states backed armed civilians in seizing claimed territory (militias, in effect).



state formation conflicts that transition uninterruptedly into interstate conflicts over territory, such as the Arab-Israeli and Indo-Pakistani Wars of the 1940s.<sup>12</sup>

Table 1 contrasts the Modern Conquest dataset with the three prior datasets. Table 2 provides a snapshot of how the datasets compare in the most recent decade covered by all four: the 1990s. As both tables suggest, the Modern Conquest dataset contains many more observations. Four inclusion/exclusion criteria explain why. Deciding differently on even one of those four criteria suffices to generate a surprisingly different history of conquest.

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<sup>12</sup> When no prior border existed, it is problematic to identify attempts to change it. Whether attempts to secede are civil or interstate conflicts raises difficult questions and too easily gets defined ex post. The omitted cases cluster in a few transitional periods: former Ottoman Empire 1910s, former Austria-Hungary 1910s, former Russian Empire 1910s, Israel-Palestine 1940s, India-Pakistan 1940s, and Balkans 1990s. For a list of secessions, see Carter and Goemans (2011).

**Table 1: What Four Conquest Datasets Include**

	<b>Modern Conquest</b>	<b>Territorial Change</b>	<b>Territorial Aggressions</b>	<b>State Deaths</b>
Number of Cases, 1946-2000 (Initial Conquest Attempts*)	91 (63)	20 (9)	40 (24)	2 (2)
Conquests of Parts of States	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Failed Attempts at Conquest	Yes	No	Yes	Partially**
Unrecognized Conquests	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Nonviolent Conquests	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Temporal Scope	1918-Present	1816-Present	1946-2000	1816-Present

\* Initial conquest attempts exclude retaliatory conquest attempts.

\*\* State Deaths include cases in which a conquest succeeded in taking control of the entire state before losing control soon afterward. However, State Deaths excludes conquests aimed at seizing a whole state that failed to gain complete control of it, such as Germany's 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union.

**Table 2: Conquest in the 1990s According to Four Datasets**

	<b>Year of Onset</b>	<b>Territory and States Involved</b>	<b>Modern Conquest</b>	<b>Territorial Change</b>	<b>Territorial Aggressions</b>	<b>State Deaths</b>
1	1990	Kuwait Iraq against Kuwait	X		X	X
2	1991	Cordillera del Condor (Pachacutec) Peru against Ecuador	X			
3	1991	Kasikili/Sududo Island* Botswana against Namibia	X	X		
4	1991	Slovenia Yugoslavia against Slovenia			X	
5	1991	Croatia (Krajina; Dubrovnik) Yugoslavia against Croatia			X	
6	1992	Bosnia (Serbian-claimed regions) Yugoslavia against Bosnia			X	
7	1993	Diamant; Jabane; Bakassi Nigeria against Cameroon	X			
8	1994	Hala'ib Triangle** Egypt against Sudan	X			
9	1995	Spratly Islands (several) China against the Philippines	X			
10	1995	Cenepa Ecuador against Peru	X		X	
11	1995	Hanish Islands Eritrea against Yemen	X			
12	1996	Imia/Kardak Greece against Turkey	X			
13	1998	Badme Eritrea against Ethiopia	X		X	
14	1999	Kargil Pakistan against India	X			
			n=11	n=1	n=6	n=1

\* The Territorial Change dataset lists one conquest of an unnamed (missing) territory with an area of five square kilometers by Botswana against an unnamed (missing) state. I infer that this datum is Kasikili/Sududo Island.

\*\* The Territorial Change dataset contains this case in the year 2000, when Sudan withdrew forces.

First, examining only conquests of entire states does generate the result that conquest nearly halted after 1945, as Fazal (2011) establishes with her State Deaths dataset. However, territory size alone cannot account for the discrepancies. The other datasets include conquests of all sizes.

Second, the Territorial Change dataset excludes failed attempts at conquest. For instance, it omits Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, a case the other three include. Excluding failed attempts is a logical choice for a broader dataset of all types of territorial changes. However, understanding the complete relationship between conquest and war requires an examination of failed conquest attempts (Fazal 2014, 100). The initial aggressor has lost nearly every war of conquest in recent decades. Excluding failed attempts results in omitting most modern wars over conquest. This explains why Goertz et al. (2016) conclude that wars of conquest largely ceased after 1975. However, the exclusion of failed attempts also cannot fully account for the discrepancy in the number of conquests.

Third, the Territorial Change dataset largely omits successful conquests that failed to garner diplomatic recognition. This appears not to be a coding rule, but rather a consequence of identifying cases primarily from cartographical sources; that is, starting from cases of maps changing and ascertaining why they did so (Tir et al. 1998, 96). When conquests succeed on the ground in the modern era, the international community often eschews recognizing them. Consequently, maps do not change. The case then does not register in the Territorial Change dataset, with certain exceptions. It appears that the norm of territorial integrity has curtailed the recognition of conquest more than the act of conquest. In effect, the norm suppressed data on conquests, not conquests themselves.

Fourth, Zacher's (2001) Territorial Aggressions exclude nonviolent conquests like Russia's in Crimea. Although this criterion disqualifies fewer cases than the three discussed above, it nonetheless suffices to paint an incomplete picture of conquest after 1945. Modern conquest usually consists of the seizure of a small piece of territory in the hope of getting away with that gain when the victim declines to escalate in response. Oftentimes, violence only occurs when this strategy (the *fait accompli*) fails. By excluding nonviolent conquests, Territorial Aggressions data disproportionately exclude successful conquests. This helps to explain why Zacher (2001; 234) concludes, "In fact, there has not been a case of *successful* territorial aggrandizement since 1976" (emphasis added). The Modern Conquest dataset contains twelve such successes before 2001 and sixteen through 2017.

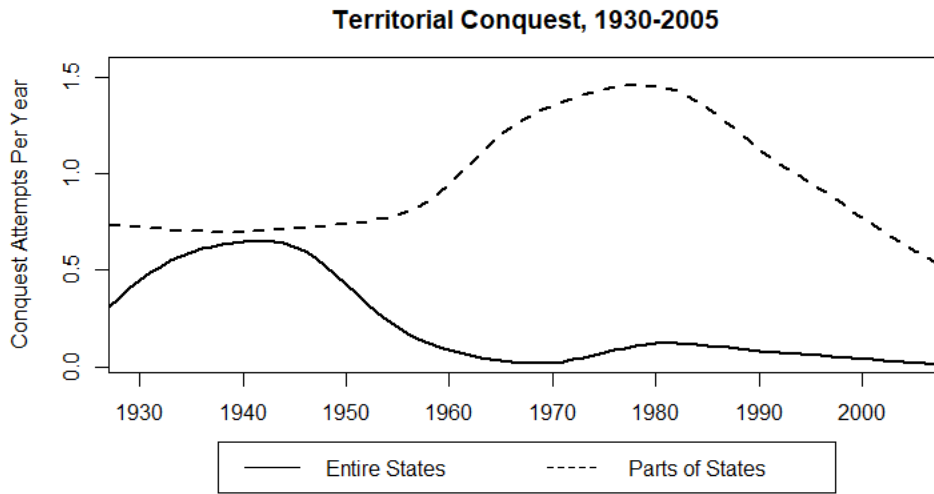
Although Modern Conquest data includes more observations overall than its predecessors, it nonetheless excludes some of the events that enter those datasets as observations. Secessionist conflicts account for many of these. For instance, six Territorial Aggressions occurred in the 1990s, but only three meet the Modern Conquest definition. The three Balkan conflicts in the 1990s do not because they erupted directly out of secession processes. Territorial Aggressions also include fighting amid territorial disputes without territorial seizures such as cross-border raids and artillery exchanges. Finally, and like Modern Conquest data, both datasets include retaliatory conquests retaking territory that was just lost to an initial conquest attempt. Here and below, I exclude these retaliatory conquests from the analysis.

The next section explores the revised history of conquest that emerges from the new data. The salient differences emerge after the Second World War. The subsequent section presents a revised history of territorial war.

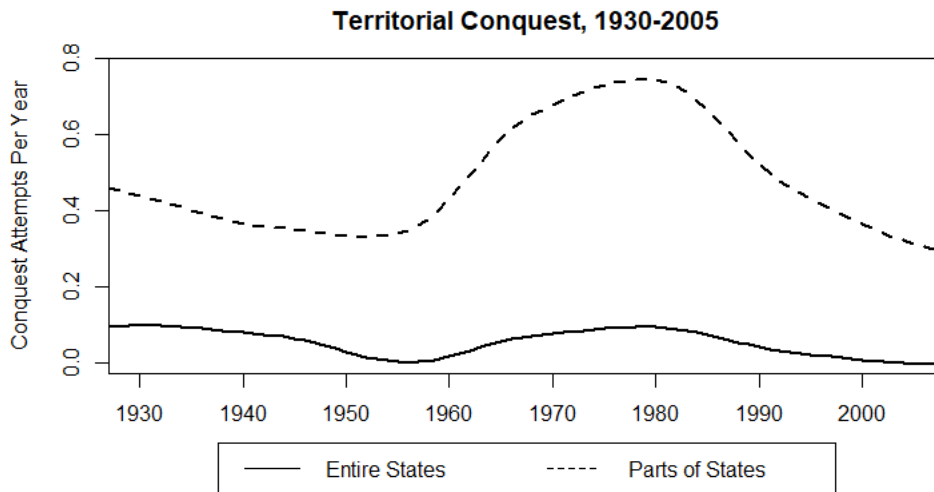
## **The Decline of Territorial Conquest?**

The consensus history of territorial conquest describes a sharp decline after 1945, particularly for attempted conquests of entire states, and the near-disappearance of all conquest after 1975. Figures 1 and 2 use Modern Conquest data to tell a different story.

**Figure 1: The Decline of Territorial Conquest? All Conquest Attempts**



**Figure 2: The Decline of Territorial Conquest? Successful Attempts Only**



The post-1945 decline in conquests of entire states did not extend to smaller conquests. No reduction to near-zero levels took place after 1975. To a previously unrecognized extent, smaller conquests persisted. In Figures 1 and 2, the solid lines present data on all cases of one state attempting to conquer another in its entirety. The dotted lines do the same for conquests of parts of states. The figures smooth out trends using LOESS regression. Although the LOESS curves make use of data from 1918 to 2017, I constrain the figures to the 1930-2005 period due to the unreliability of the curves near the boundaries of the data (where the curves cannot draw on data from both sides of the estimates). More than it declined in frequency, conquest shrank in size after 1945. In comparison to four attempts to conquer entire states, one state attempted to conquer part of another 65 times since 1945.

Figure 1 includes both successful and failed attempts at conquest. Figure 2 includes only conquests in which the occupier retained control over the territory immediately after the end of the associated militarized dispute, crisis, or war. Because conquest attempts tend to either fail quickly or succeed (see Table 3 below), Figure 2 is not especially sensitive to the duration that a conquest attempt must hold territory to qualify as successful. As comparing the figures suggests, the success rate of attempts to conquer parts of states remained remarkably steady at around fifty percent across the period.<sup>13</sup> I return to this comparison below, because it calls into question the claim that the norm of territorial integrity has reduced the success rate of conquest attempts.

The rising number of states in the international system after 1945 due to decolonization complicates the analysis of conquest trends. Indeed, most post-1945 conquests involve new states contesting their inherited borders. Many of these territorial disputes festered decades after independence; some, like Kashmir, continue today. Adjusting Figures 1 and 2 for the number of states in the system does steepen the apparent decline in attempts to conquer parts of states (see Appendix I for adjusted charts).<sup>14</sup> Intriguingly, however, the decline still begins around 1980. This means that the decline in smaller conquests seems not to have begun immediately after 1945 and conquest did not nearly vanish from the world by 1976.

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<sup>13</sup> The drop-off among entire-state conquests reflects the eventual defeat of the Axis in World War II.

<sup>14</sup> Because describing the frequency of conquest in a simple and accessible manner is the primary purpose of this section, I present the adjusted trends only in Appendix I. The adjustment renders the y-axis values difficult to interpret.

Both the standard history and the revised history presented here are stories of decline. Nonetheless, the differences between them are significant for two reasons. First, the steepness of conquest's decline matters. The most widely used conquest dataset, Territorial Change, records four conquests (and zero annexations) since 1975. The Modern Conquest figure is 35 initial conquest attempts among 49 total conquest attempts. The substantive difference between one conquest attempt per year and one conquest per decade is striking. It affects the expected number of interstate wars. It means conquest is still a recurrent and important part of international politics. Moreover, second, after disaggregating smaller conquest attempts based on their war propensity, I show below that not all types of conquest declined. The decline of attempts to conquer parts of states around the 1980s – visible in Figures 1 and 2 – consists almost entirely of a decline in seizures of territories with characteristics that elevate the chances of provoking war. “War-averse” conquest attempts without those characteristics continued to occur with regularity.

Figures 1 and 2 conveyed the shrinking size of conquest after 1945, but modern conquests exhibit other noteworthy characteristics. Table 3 presents summary statistics describing the 69 initial conquest attempts since 1945.<sup>15</sup> These conquest attempts more frequently occurred in the postcolonial world, often amid disputes over new international borders. The prevalence of conquest in regions other than Europe marks a major departure from the concentration of territorial conflict in Europe before 1945. Conquest abruptly shifted from disproportionately European to disproportionately non-European. That reflects the high-water mark of European imperialism and the resultant dearth of sovereign states elsewhere in the Eastern Hemisphere. Receding further in time to include more European imperial conquests would qualify this comparison.

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<sup>15</sup> Region refers to the location of the seized territory.



**Table 3: The Characteristics of Conquest Attempts, 1945-2017**

<i>Region</i>		
Africa	16	(24%)
Americas	9	(13%)
Asia	26	(38%)
Europe	4	(6%)
Middle East	13	(19%)
<i>Outcome</i>		
War (1,000 Battle Deaths)	19	(28%)
Violence (1 Battle Death)	46	(67%)
Held after Initial Dispute/War	34	(49%)
Held after Ten Years*	28	(44%)

<i>Regime Type</i>	<i>Challenger</i>	<i>Defender**</i>
Democracy (Polity $\geq$ 8)	15 (22%)	17 (25%)
Anocracy	41 (59%)	39 (57%)
Autocracy (Polity $\leq$ -8)	13 (19%)	12 (18%)
<i>Power Level</i>		
Major Power	6 (9%)	9 (13%)
Regional Power	28 (41%)	26 (38%)
Minor Power	35 (51%)	33 (49%)

\*Conquest attempts after 2008 omitted.

\*\*Regime type and power level data missing for Timor-Leste (1975).

*Sources: War data from the Correlates of War Interstate Wars list. Regime Type data from Polity IV (Marshall and Jaggers 2002). Major Power data from the Correlates of War Major Powers list. Regional Power data from Lemke (2002).*

Approximately the same number of conquest attempts after 1945 occurred without any battle deaths (23) as led to a war of over 1,000 battle deaths (19). The nineteen wars underscore the continuing importance of territorial war in the modern era. The twenty-three nonviolent conquest attempts defy any assumption that violence inheres in conquest.

Conquest attempts after 1945 exhibit noteworthy diversity. Both the perpetrators and victims of conquest attempts include democracies and nondemocracies, great powers and smaller states. In keeping with the democratic peace, only two pitted one democracy against another (Oneal and Russett 1997). The comparative rarity of conquest involvement for major powers reflects the larger numbers of regional and minor powers in the international system. However, given the history of disproportionate major power involvement in interstate conflicts (Bremer 1992), the prevalence of minor power conquest attempts deserves mention. Similarly, the long-observed tendency for conflicts to break out more often between states at similar power levels extends to conquest attempts (Moul 2003); challenger and defender power levels correlate. No clear pattern emerges of strong states victimizing weaker neighbors.

Set against the backdrops of the post-Cold War European security and the prevailing view that territorial conquest all but subsided by the late 1970s, Russia's 2014 conquest of Crimea seems an extraordinary aberration. When compared to the picture painted above using Modern Conquest data, however, it appears more ordinary. Its location in Europe, the level of power asymmetry, and its involvement of a great power register as unusual, but hardly unprecedented. Crimea's most unusual feature is Russia's success at taking a garrisoned territory without violence, a rare (but, again, not unprecedented) combination. Although not a typical case, Crimea fits more comfortably within the revised history conquest presented here than the existing belief that conquest has largely subsided.

## **The Decline of Territorial War?**

Because territory has long ranked as the foremost issue over which states wage war, any decline in conquest should cause a decline in interstate warfare. If territorial conquest virtually ceased to occur, territorial war should have too. However, an examination of interstate wars in recent decades suggests the opposite. To facilitate comparison, I focus on the window of 1976 to 2006, which Goertz et al. (2016) use to highlight the declines of conquest and war. Drawing on the standard Correlates of War list, states

waged eighteen interstate wars in that period (Sarkees et al. 2010). Nine of those eighteen wars began with a conquest attempt.<sup>16</sup> Fighting for sovereign control over territory played a central role in four more of the eighteen.<sup>17</sup> That sums to thirteen territorial wars out of eighteen interstate wars. Table 4 lists these eighteen wars and the years in which they began.

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<sup>16</sup> The Ugandan-Tanzanian and Cambodian-Vietnamese Wars each began with a limited territorial seizure that provoked a better-known retaliatory invasion culminating in regime change.

<sup>17</sup> Because it continued uninterruptedly from Libya's military intervention in Chad's civil war, the Chad-Libya case is distinct from an initial conquest attempt. Nagorno-Karabakh, Bosnia, Kosovo are secessionist conflicts. All save the Armenia-Azerbaijan case qualify as Territorial Aggressions (Zacher 2001).

**Table 4: Interstate Wars, 1976-2006**

<b>Wars Begun by Conquest Attempts</b>	<b>Other Wars over Territory</b>	<b>All Remaining Wars</b>
Ogaden War (1977)	Chad-Libya War (1986)	Sino-Vietnamese War (1979)
Ugandan-Tanzanian War (1978)	Nagorno-Karabakh War (1992)	War in Lebanon (1982)
Cambodian-Vietnamese War (1979)	Bosnian Independence (1992)	Sino-Vietnamese War (1987)
Iran-Iraq War (1980)	Kosovo War (1999)	Afghanistan War (2001)
Falklands War (1982)		Iraq War (2003)
Gulf War (1990)		
Cenepa War (1995)		
Badme War (1998)		
Kargil War (1999)		

**Table 5: Has Territorial War Become Rare?**

	<b>Wars Begun by Conquest Attempts</b>	<b>Other Wars over Territory</b>	<b>All Other Wars</b>	<b>% Territorial</b>
1918-1945	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	94%
1946-1975	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	80%
1976-2017	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	72%

Table 5 extends this tripartite division of interstate wars back to 1918. It reveals only a small reduction in the proportion of wars over territory and wars begun by conquest attempts.<sup>18</sup> Although the proportion of territorial wars did decline, it did so only modestly – a far cry from virtually ceasing to occur.<sup>19</sup> Territorial war remains critically important in international politics.

Table 4 also suggests some other conclusions (though the limited number of observations renders them, of necessity, tentative). Most recent wars of conquest occur in the Global South pitting two non-major powers against each other. Major powers, particularly the United States, tend to intervene in wars for reasons other than territorial expansion, such as the removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as part of the Global War on Terror. The Gulf War and the Falklands War are partial exceptions. Nonetheless, the minority of major power wars of intervention contrasts with the majority of territorial wars between smaller powers. Fazal's (2011, 173; also see Mueller 2007) conclusion that wars of intervention and regime change have supplanted wars of conquest finds some support here, but only for major powers, principally the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the rarity of entire-state conquests after 1945 accords with the dearth of protracted high-intensity interstate wars. It also accords with the rarity of warfare between major powers. These facts suggest another tentative conclusion: territorial war (and thus interstate war) has declined more in intensity than in frequency.<sup>21</sup> However, because major wars occur infrequently, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions. Long periods without major wars might occur simply by chance (Braumoeller 2013).

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<sup>18</sup> Tables 4-5 do not imply an inferential claim about the causes of these wars. Instead, they merely observe whether a conquest attempt occurred at the outset of each war.

<sup>19</sup> Simply recoding the second Sino-Vietnamese War, a simmering struggle over strategic hills along the border, would severely weaken the apparent downward trend. However, I follow Fravel (2008) and Zhang (2015) in regarding China's motive as pressuring Vietnam over its intervention in Cambodia, not acquiring territory.

<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the apparent increase in non-territorial interstate war may reflect the evolution of certain conflicts to interstate status that might have instead been extra-state conflicts in earlier periods. The Taliban, for instance, might not have been recognized as a state actor in an earlier era. In line with this possibility, the number of CoW extra-state (colonial and imperial) wars drops to seven in the 1976-2006 period. This contrasts to sixteen from 1918 to 1945 and fifteen from 1946 to 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Trends in casualty tolls are quite sensitive to periodization and the treatment of a few extreme cases such as World War II and the Iran-Iraq War. An adequate analysis requires a lengthier discussion than is possible here. Fazal (2014) details how improvements in battlefield medicine complicate casualty comparisons over time.

## The Norm of Territorial Integrity

The norm of territorial integrity ranks as the leading explanation for the decline of conquest and a candidate for the most important cause of the decline of interstate war. Indeed, of the six empirical studies of the decline of conquest, four argue for a version of the norm as the primary cause (Zacher 2001; Fazal 2011; Atzili 2012; Goertz et al. 2016). The remaining two make normative arguments about the decline of violence that they do not conceptually distinguish from the norm (Pinker 2012; Hathaway and Shapiro 2017).<sup>22</sup> It is, therefore, worthwhile to focus on this leading explanation, reexamining it with new data. The question is not whether the norm exists at all, but rather whether it has the constraining power to greatly reduce the incidence of conquest and war.

The observable implications of the norm of territorial integrity – predictions that should accord with the evidence if the theory is valid – offer a starting point. I use here those offered by existing studies supportive of the norm. First, the proportion of wars fought over territory – and specifically wars that begin with conquest attempts – should decline over time after 1945. As Table 5 showed, however, no dramatic decline took place. Wars over territory, while slightly less common, still account for most interstate wars. Second, conquest attempts should become less common over time, particularly after 1945. As Figure 1 displayed and as I explore further below, however, the history of conquest after 1945 is not a simple tale of decline. Some forms of conquest declined while others did not. Third, norm-advocates claim that conquest attempts now provoke a stronger response from the international community, particularly interventions by third parties and international organizations to uphold the norm. Consequently, fourth, when conquest attempts do still occur, they now succeed less often. Finally, fifth, interstate wars now end with changes to prewar borders less frequently. Having addressed the first two points above (and further below), I consider the remainder here.

Did a strengthening norm of territorial integrity spur more aggressive attempts to reverse conquests and thereby uphold the norm? The striking concentration of territorial wars among failed conquest attempts since 1975 seems consistent with this belief in increased norm-driven intervention.

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<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, there are numerous additional candidate explanations for the decline of conquest. Brooks (2005; but see Liberman 1998) notably argues that conquest yields fewer benefits to states with industrialized and globalized economies, who therefore less often seize territory. I return to the issue of alternative explanations in the next section.

However, empirical assessment suggests otherwise. For attempted conquests of parts of states, third-party military interventions occurred infrequently and have not become more common in recent decades. For attempted conquests of entire states, third-party interventions have always been fairly common – likely for *realpolitik* reasons that long predate the norm. Moreover, there is no large decline in the success rate of conquest, as the comparison between Figures 1 and 2 suggested. Conquest attempts fail frequently, but they failed roughly as often before 1945.

By and large, the victims of smaller conquests have been on their own. Of the 63 initial conquest attempts targeting parts of states since 1945, in only five did a third-party state – a friend or ally of the victim – enter the conflict and fire at least one shot in defense of the victim. Morocco’s 1963 attempt to seize the Algerian provinces of Tindouf and Colomb-Bechar elicited Egyptian and Cuban intervention to support Algeria. Israel’s 1967 seizure of the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt prompted Syria, Jordan, and Iraq to intervene against Israel. In 1974, Greece intervened on behalf of Cyprus in response to Turkey’s invasion. In 1977, Cuba and Yemen intervened to defend Ethiopia against a Somali invasion of the Ogaden. In 1978, Mozambique deployed a single battalion to fight for Tanzania after Idi Amin’s Uganda seized the Kagera Salient. The paucity of these cases combined with their clustered occurrence toward the middle of the postwar era (rather than the most recent decades) suggests that third party intervention was not growing more common. If anything, the data hint at the intensity of Cold War proxy conflicts in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s (Westad 2005). Outside that era, violent interventions against conquest attempts targeting parts of states remained rare throughout the 1918-2017 period.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to the dearth of external interventions after attempts to conquer parts of states, military interventions have more often opposed attempts to conquer entire states. The coalitions that reversed Iraq’s 1990 conquest of Kuwait and North Korea’s 1950 invasion of the South illustrate this. Germany’s 1939 invasion of Poland led Britain and France to declare war. Germany’s 1914 invasion of Belgium did the same for Britain. Third parties may have a stronger interest in the survival of their allies – to preserve the balance of power, for instance – than in those allies’ retention of small border regions. This suggests that *realpolitik* governed decisions whether to intervene to reverse conquests.

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<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the impact of those interventions on military outcomes seems dubious.

However, third-party interventions need not use violence to succeed. Have increasingly robust diplomatic interventions by third-party states and international organizations reduced the success rate of conquest? The diversity of forms of nonviolent intervention complicates observing them (Corbetta and Dixon 2005). Distinguishing intensive efforts from token statements poses a particular challenge. Rather than attempt to observe these interventions and adjudicate among their varieties, Table 6 examines them indirectly by evaluating whether increasingly vigorous diplomatic interventions – consequences of a strengthening norm – increased the failure rate of conquest attempts over time. Overall, the data provide few signs of that. Instead, the failure rate of conquest attempts consistently lingers around fifty percent. The success rate of conquest attempts decreases only slightly after 1945.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Incorporating entire-state conquests eliminates even this slight decrease because it injects so many Axis conquests during World War II that ultimately failed.



**Table 6: Outcomes of Attempts to Conquer Parts of States**

	Held by Perpetrator	Lost by Perpetrator	% Held
1918-1945	<b>14</b>	<b>9</b>	58%
1946-1979	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	49%
1980-2017	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	50%

Why are past studies sanguine about the contribution of international organizations to reducing the success rate of conquest? Zacher's (2001) brief case narratives for each territorial aggression – in conjunction with a few high-profile cases like the Gulf War – laid the basis for this belief.<sup>25</sup> Those cases indeed establish that recent conquests often failed, sometimes due to third parties. However, aggression and conquest failed frequently before the norm of territorial integrity grew stronger after 1945. A high failure rate need not imply an increased failure rate. In this instance, there was no significant increase. Zacher's territorial aggressions data begin in 1946, which hindered making that comparison. Second, as discussed above, Zacher's exclusion of nonviolent conquests resulted in the disproportionate omission of successful conquests. Third, although brief case narratives can observe the occurrence of a diplomatic intervention, those data alone are insufficient for inferring that interventions affected outcomes. Consider Zacher's narrative for the 1977 Ogaden conflict: "An OAU [Organization of African Unity] committee called for respect for the former boundary. Somalia withdrew all forces by 1980." Somalia did not so much withdraw due to OAU diplomacy as get violently ejected by Ethiopia.

Finally, Zacher (2001) reports that nearly eighty percent of wars before 1945 ended in territorial redistributions, but only approximately thirty percent since then. This seems to evince a transformative, norm-induced change in the international system. However, to generate that result, Zacher compared data from Holsti (1991, 274-278) before 1945 to his own list of territorial aggressions after 1945. Those two sets of cases differ in ways that contributed to the strength of the discrepancy. Although Zacher uses it only up to 1945, Holsti's data extends to 1989, which permits comparison to Zacher's data from 1946-1989. In that period, Holsti identifies 41 cases of "wars and major armed interventions" over the issue types Zacher identifies as territorial. Zacher reports 34 territorial aggressions in that period. However, the two lists only share 17 cases in common. Zacher's cases include small incidents below the severity threshold of Holsti's data. Holsti's list includes many cases of contested secession – often resistance movements leading to decolonization – that Zacher excludes. Such cases quite often resulted in border changes. For both reasons, Holsti's list of cases contains a greater proportion of border

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<sup>25</sup> I suspect one further reason: the conflation of two meanings of "success." For third-party mediators, success often means bringing violence to a halt. For the purposes of this study, however, success is a question of which side retains control over the territory. Therefore, third parties can succeed at their primary mission without affecting the success rate of conquest.

changes. Extending Zacher's pre-1945 methodology to the 1946-1989 period, the rate of border changes did drop below 80 percent, but to 59 percent rather than 30 percent.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, that reduction in the frequency of postwar border adjustments after 1945 does not imply the corresponding reduction in territorial wars that it appears to require. The victims of failed conquest attempts now more rarely take adversary territory as a sort of reparation after wars end. Instead, they more often limit their territorial aims to restoring the status quo ante (Hathaway and Shapiro 2017, 322).<sup>27</sup> Comparing Britain and France's territorial acquisitions after World War I to their comparative restraint after World War II illustrates this. Consequently, and because aggressors frequently lose territorial wars, the decline of border changes after wars exceeds the decline in wars fought over attempts to change borders.<sup>28</sup>

On balance, the evidence does not sustain claims that the norm of territorial integrity vanquished conquest, greatly curtailed the incidence of interstate war, increased third-party military interventions to uphold the territorial status quo ante, or curbed the success rate of conquest attempts. However, those conclusions do not invalidate the existence or significance of the norm. Instead, the analysis points to a more nuanced understanding of its role. First, the norm does seem to have suppressed the diplomatic recognition of conquest (Goertz et al. 2016, 117; O'Mahoney 2018).<sup>29</sup> Second, the increasing tendency for the victims of conquest attempts that defeat the aggressors to forgo territorial gains beyond restoring the territorial status quo ante is consistent with norm adherence. Third, states no longer legitimize territorial seizures as justified "by right of conquest" (Korman 1996).<sup>30</sup> Instead, a prior territorial claim precedes almost every conquest attempt.<sup>31</sup> This raises an intriguing possibility: because they view the territory they seize as rightfully theirs, perhaps few of the states that attempt conquest in the modern era perceive themselves as violating the norm?<sup>32</sup> If not, true norm

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<sup>26</sup> This figure is quite tentative. I excluded several marginal cases for a variety of reasons, for instance the conquest of entities such as Tibet and Hyderabad with questionable status as sovereign states. Because Holsti's data includes so many cases of decolonization, I caution future studies against using it to examine conquest. I do so only in order to re-evaluate Zacher.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, only a few retaliatory conquest attempts sought territory other than that which was just seized.

<sup>28</sup> This is especially true if other states must recognize a border change for it to register as one.

<sup>29</sup> I encourage a future study to assemble the data on post-conquest recognition decisions to confirm this directly.

<sup>30</sup> Intriguingly, Korman (1996, 100) notes that the right of conquest only obtained during declared wars, which would exclude most modern conquest attempts.

<sup>31</sup> Assertion based on the ICOW territorial claims dataset (Hensel et al. 2008).

<sup>32</sup> My thanks to Michelle Jurkovich for this idea.

violations are rare, but conquests can occur without an intention to violate the norm. In sum, skepticism about whether the norm of territorial integrity is the principal cause of the declines of conquest and interstate war does not imply outright rejection of the norm.

## Conquest, War, and Causation

Because the evidence for the constraining power of the norm of territorial integrity is mixed at best, it is worth asking what else may explain the observed evolution of conquest. Existing studies explain the decline of conquest first and then apply that finding to the decline of interstate war. However, the opposite possibility deserves consideration. What if the decline in conquest is merely a symptom of the decline of war, not its cause? What if the decline is not of conquest, but rather of war-prone policies? What if some constraint against war-prone aggression has strengthened over time, beginning or accelerating in 1945? If so, war-prone forms of conquest should decline earlier and more strongly while less war-prone conquests should prove more persistent. Subsequent sections show that this proposition is crucial for explaining the evolution of conquest after 1945. Conquest attempts incurring less risk of war continued to occur. The operative constraint is against war-prone aggression, not forceful border revision.

If the decline of (certain war-prone forms of) conquest is merely a consequence of the decline of war, then its causes need not pertain directly to territorial conflict. Virtually any non-territorial explanation for the decline in interstate war offers a plausible reason why conquest declined. For instance, suppose that the proliferation of liberal ideas – or of nuclear weapons – made states more reluctant to start wars (Owen 1994; Sagan and Waltz 2013). If so, states would need to refrain from conquest in order to avoid war. The reason conquest declined need not have anything to do with conquest itself; it need only explain rising reluctance to wage war. The changing structure of the international system after 1945 might explain it (Waltz 1979; Wohlforth 1999). Or, the unique nature of U.S. foreign policy as the strongest power in the international system might do so (Ikenberry 1998).<sup>33</sup> War aversion has many plausible *realpolitik* and ideational explanations. Mueller (1990; 2007) makes

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<sup>33</sup> However, Zacher (2001) and Fazal (2011), among others, explicitly incorporate U.S. foreign policy and its tendency to uphold the norm of territorial integrity into their arguments about how the norm constrains conquest. I found it difficult to draw a clean distinction between these two candidate causes of the decline of conquest. Consequently, I may do these studies an injustice on this point.

the case for a robust norm of war aversion (also see Hathaway and Shapiro 2017). Pinker (2012) makes a similar claim about violence aversion more generally (but see Braumoeller 2018). The evidence presented below accords better with a broader norm against aggression than a narrower territorial norm against conquest.<sup>34</sup>

The remainder of the study flows from and assesses this premise that the decline of conquest is a symptom of the decline of war, rather than its cause. War-prone conquests like those seizing entire states declined earlier and more steeply. “War-averse” conquests seizing smaller and less valuable territories – usually without provoking war – proved more obstinate. In simple terms, conquest after 1945 exhibits gradually increasing caution. It could have transpired that states would forgo conquest almost altogether as they increasingly sought to avoid starting wars. Instead, states avoided only war-prone conquest while privileging and persisting with war-averse conquest.<sup>35</sup>

## The Evolution of the Strategy of Conquest

When can states “get away” with conquest, taking territory with reduced risk of war? To understand territorial conquest after 1945, it is necessary to understand how the underlying political strategy behind conquest evolved and how the role of warfare therein changed. After all, war and conquest naturally seem to go hand in hand. Before 1945, they more often did. Aggressors invaded, defeated defenders’ armies, and took the territories they desired. The strategy of brute force – a term Schelling (1966) coined to describe imposing one’s will by destroying or disabling the adversary rather than coercing their cooperation – seems a natural fit for conquest. For conquests of entire states, it is apt. However, it applies poorly to smaller conquest attempts, which avoid war most of the time and sometimes avoid violence altogether.

There exist, I argue, two distinct strategies of territorial conquest: brute force and the *fait accompli*.<sup>36</sup> A *fait accompli* imposes a limited gain without permission in an attempt to induce the

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<sup>34</sup> Korman (1996, 303) concludes similarly.

<sup>35</sup> Along similar lines, Lee (2018) shows that states more often avoid war by attacking with nonstate proxies to weaken neighbors.

<sup>36</sup> For more on this distinction, see Altman 2017.

adversary to relent rather than escalate in response.<sup>37</sup> Each *fait accompli* is a calculated risk; in this context, a gamble that taking a piece of territory will not provoke war. 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 rather than go to war. Sometimes this succeeds, as with China's seizure of the Paracel Islands in 1974. Other *faits accomplis* fail when they miscalculate and elicit a strong response. For instance, 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. The concept of the *fait accompli* is particularly useful for understanding smaller conquests.

Brute force and the *fait accompli* differ in key respects. Brute force embraces war in an attempt to seize territory. The *fait accompli*, in contrast seizes small piece of territory in an attempt to avoid war. War onset reflects the failure of the strategy, whereas for brute force it is the initial step in implementing the strategy.<sup>38</sup> Observably, the *fait accompli* generally targets much smaller territories and provokes war far less frequently.

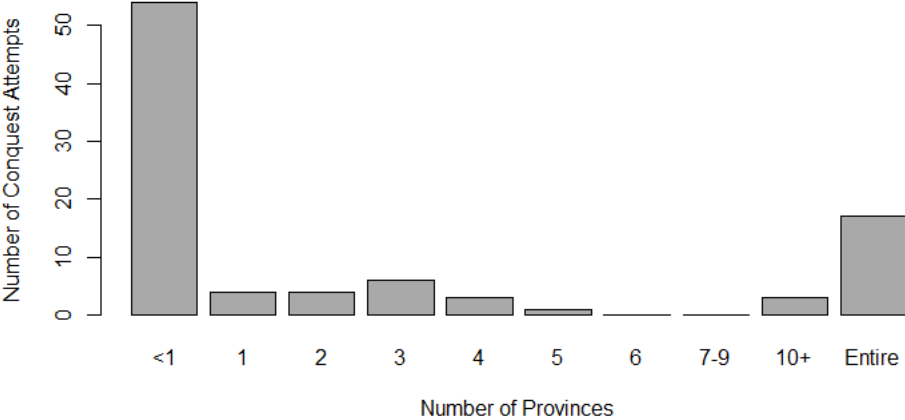
Merely establishing the correlation between seizing larger territories and a greater probability of war would not conclusively establish the utility of this dichotomy. Such a result is only to be expected. Instead, Figure 3 takes a different approach to providing an empirical basis for this conceptual distinction between brute force and the *fait accompli*. In brief, the two strategies target territories of discontinuously different sizes. Although seizing part of a state's territory and seizing all of it might seem to differ only in degree, that is, in effect, not the case. As the targeted territory grows larger, prospects diminish of getting away with taking it without provoking war. Once the stakes grow high enough that the defender will resist to the limits of its abilities, the challenger has little reason to curtail its territorial ambitions. Consequently, challengers either aim for the entire territory and adopt a brute force strategy or aim to get away with taking a much smaller prize by *fait accompli*.

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<sup>37</sup> Altman 2017; Altman 2018; George and Smoke 1974, 536-540; Schelling 1966, 44-45; Snyder and Diesing 1977, 227; Tarar 2016; Van Evera 1998, 10.

<sup>38</sup> However, a few brute force conquests did not provoke war because the victim did not fully resist (all cases of large power asymmetry).

**Figure 3: The Bimodality of Conquest, 1918-2017**



*The conceptual distinction between the fait accompli (left) and brute force (right) maps onto the empirical distribution of the sizes of territories seized in conquest attempts.*

Figure 3 provides the distribution of the sizes of territories seized in conquest attempts between 1918 and 2017 using the number of provinces as a crude measure of size.<sup>39</sup> That distribution exhibits a striking degree of bimodality. Seizing half – or one quarter, or three quarters – of a defender’s territory is quite rare.<sup>40</sup> Although Figure 3 separates seizures of part of one province (the first bar) from seizures of exactly one province (the second bar), it thereafter combines them.<sup>41</sup> That is, seizing small parts of two provinces registers as seizing two provinces in the figure, and so on. Consequently, Figure 3 understates the bimodality evident in the data. The three case of seizing 10+ provinces each resulted from failed attempt to conquer an entire state: Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Japan’s invasion of China, and North Korea’s invasion of South Korea. The largest initial conquest attempts as a proportion of the defender’s total territory (aside from those targeting entire states) were Yugoslavia’s invasion of Albania in 1921, Japan’s seizure of Manchuria in 1931, Russia’s attack on Finland in 1939, and Turkey’s invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Beyond those cases, events such as Israel’s 1956 and 1967 occupations of the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip rank among the largest remaining conquest attempts. Put more simply, most conquest attempts were small, especially after 1945.<sup>42</sup>

Whereas conquest once encompassed a mix of brute force and *fait accompli* strategies, after World War II the former declined so sharply the *fait accompli* became the primary strategy of modern conquest. Figures 1 and 2 charted the first part of this evolution as conquest became more cautious. Below I document the second.

## The Decline of War-Prone Conquest

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<sup>39</sup> Although provinces provide only a crude gauge of territory size, this approach offers several advantages over the alternatives. First, it suffices to depict the bimodality. Second, it avoids the considerable amount of missing data that would accompany a more precise measurement approach (although this constraint is weakening due to research like Schultz 2017). Third, provinces tend to reflect the true underlying variable of interest – relative territorial value from the perspective of each conquest victim – at least as well as absolute size or proportional physical size. Nonetheless, this approach is imprecise and noisy for several reasons, including variation in province size.

<sup>40</sup> Schultz (2017, 1575) shows that the same bimodality characterizes territorial claims more generally, which also appear to be shrinking in size. This may or may not indicate that states are designing their claims around their potential strategies for seizing territory.

<sup>41</sup> The fourteen attempts to conquer overseas colonies are omitted. Territories with an ill-defined provincial status are considered part of the nearest adjacent/proximate province(s).

<sup>42</sup> Given the degree of heterogeneity, future studies of territorial disputes should consider dividing cases into two categories: entire states and parts of states.



One dominant thread runs through the evolution of conquest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the decline of war-prone conquest. The first change happened abruptly: attempts to conquer states in their entirety became rare immediately after the end of the Second World War. Nonetheless, to a previously unrecognized extent, smaller conquests persisted. By the mid-1980s, the second stage was well underway: the decline of comparatively war-prone seizures of small tracts of territory. However, lower-risk territorial seizures fully embracing the *fait accompli* strategy again continued. As a result, war-averse conquests account for an increasing proportion of conquest attempts over time during the post-1945 period.<sup>43</sup> The decline of conquest remained partial and incomplete; it is better understood as the decline only of war-prone conquest.

To understand where states can attempt conquest with the least risk of war is to identify the conditions under which modern conquest tends to take place. Under what conditions, then, can states attempt conquest with a reasonable expectation of avoiding war? Both the prevalence of geographically small conquests and the logic of the *fait accompli* point to an answer: target low-value territories. Rather than fight for them, defenders should more willingly sacrifice smaller areas with less valuable attributes.<sup>44</sup> This reasoning dovetails with the emphasis on territory characteristics in past studies of territorial conflict, which specifically emphasize population size, natural resources, strategic location, and ethnic identity motivations.<sup>45</sup>

A statistical analysis of the conditions under which conquest attempts more often lead to war provides a tentative basis for identifying the characteristics of war-averse conquest attempts (see Appendix II for details). The results suggest that population and strategic value correlate strongly with an increased probability of war. Natural resources and ethnic identity motives, surprisingly, do not.<sup>46</sup> Relative military power also fails to correlate with the propensity for war among conquest attempts. I

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<sup>43</sup> Note that the prediction is for a proportional increase, not an absolute increase.

<sup>44</sup> Of course, lower value also gives challengers less motive to seize the territory, which could offset this incentive.

<sup>45</sup> Carter 2010; Diehl and Goertz 2002, 15-21; Hensel et al. 2008; Huth 1996; Huth and Allee 2002; Tir and Vasquez 2012; Wiegand 2011. Although I am sympathetic to the role of perceived homeland status of territories (see, for instance, Shelef 2016), the paucity of non-homeland cases using ICOW's variable led me to omit it. This rarity of non-homeland conquest attempts may evince the importance of homeland perceptions for conquest after 1945.

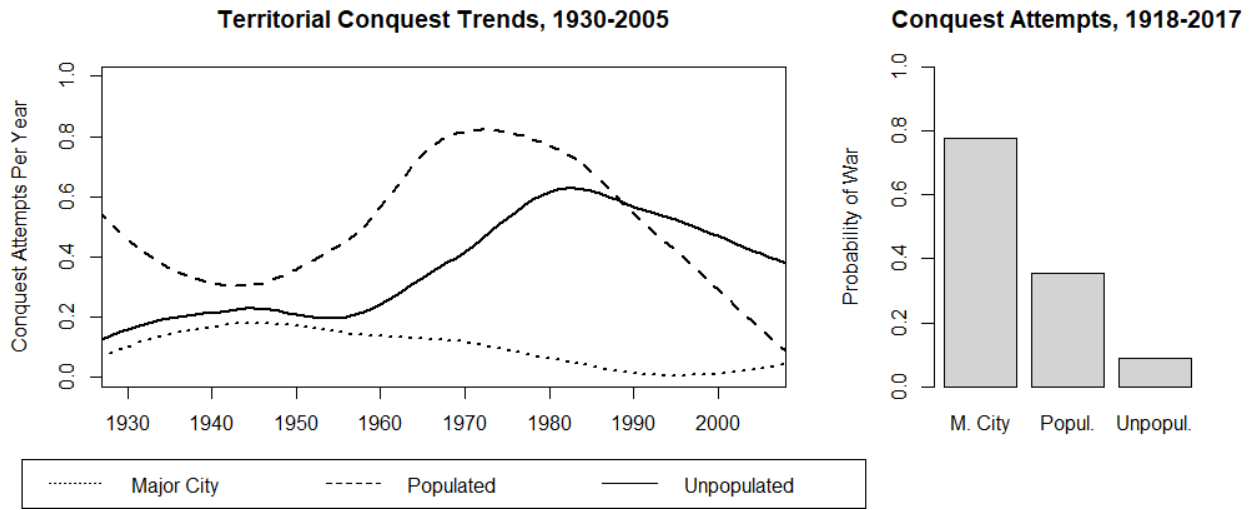
<sup>46</sup> However, Schultz (2017) shows that states are not more likely to dispute resource-rich regions than other border regions.

leave a deeper investigation of those results to future research,<sup>47</sup> focusing here on the two variables that offer better indicators for the war-proneness of conquest attempts. The two standard measures of strategic value aggregate many diverse sources of it (Hensel and Mitchell 2005, 278; Huth 1996), complicating the task of drawing conclusions about its role. Consequently, I instead utilize a related but simpler variable: the presence/absence of a military garrison in the seized territory. The gradual shifts away from seizing populous and defended territories reveal themselves clearly.

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<sup>47</sup> The results also suggest that the combination of democratic defenders and autocratic challengers elevates the likelihood of war. However, lacking confidence that I understand the reasons behind that result, I do not utilize it here.

**Figure 4: The Evolution of Territorial Conquest (Population)**



*Attempts to conquer entire states are excluded from Figure 4.*

Seizing populous territories incurs a greater risk of provoking war than seizing unpopulated regions. The import of population for the probability of war comes as little surprise. Population affects virtually every reason why states value territory: economic production, political representation, prestige, moral responsibility to citizens, and more. The right side of Figure 4 bears this out. From 1918-2017, seizing territories with at least one major city (100,000 or more inhabitants) led to war 78 percent of the time.<sup>48</sup> Seizing a populated region without such a city (such as several villages) provoked war 36 percent of the time. Seizing an unpopulated area, in contrast, provoked war only 9 percent of the time. This three-level scheme is adopted from the ICOW Territorial Claims dataset, but the variable is coded anew. ICOW's population variable describes the full claimed territory (Hensel et al. 2008; Frederick et al. 2017), whereas Modern Conquest data describes the seized region only. Challengers sometimes occupy only a small part of a larger disputed/claimed territory.

The left side of Figure 4 shows that conquest attempts targeting populous territories declined earlier and more sharply. This decline began in the 1970s and proceeded rapidly to the present. Indeed, around 1990 seizing unpopulated areas became the modal type of conquest for the first time. The sharp decrease in the rate of conquest attempts seizing populated regions around the 1980s marks the second stage of the evolution of conquest as it became increasingly war-averse.

Attempts to conquer territories with military garrisons exhibit a similar evolution around the 1980s. States can attempt to seize territory while minimizing the risk of war by avoiding garrisoned territories. Taking full control of a garrisoned territory requires dislodging adversary forces, usually by attacking them. The garrison variable observes whether the defender had already deployed forces to the area that was then seized.<sup>49</sup> Specifically, it records whether at least one armed and uniformed state official was stationed in the seized territory when the conquest attempt began. This definition includes militiamen and police, who are not easily distinguished from soldiers in some contexts. I refer to ungarrisoned territories as undefended. In line with expectations, seizing a garrisoned territory usually

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<sup>48</sup> Attempts to conquer entire states remain excluded.

<sup>49</sup> The exclusion of retaliatory conquest attempts from the analysis means that these troops were usually present long before the conquest attempt. In some cases, however, reinforcing an existing position (behavior that falls short of a conquest attempt) does provoke a conquest attempt.

implies combat with the garrison. Only five attempts to seize a garrisoned territory did not result in at least one battle death.<sup>50</sup>

Although garrisons can function as an indicator of strategic value, the theoretical basis for placing emphasis on garrisons comes from the deterrence literature's concept of tripwires. This concept holds that states can forward deploy troops to a contested area to more strongly commit themselves to fight if that area – and thus the troops – come under attack (Fearon 1997, 70; Freedman 2003; Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014, 923; Schelling 1966). Deterrence theorists generally agree that tripwires enhance deterrent credibility. When tripped, war becomes more likely.<sup>51</sup> It follows, then, that conquest attempts that limit their ambitions to undefended areas can more often avoid provoking war.

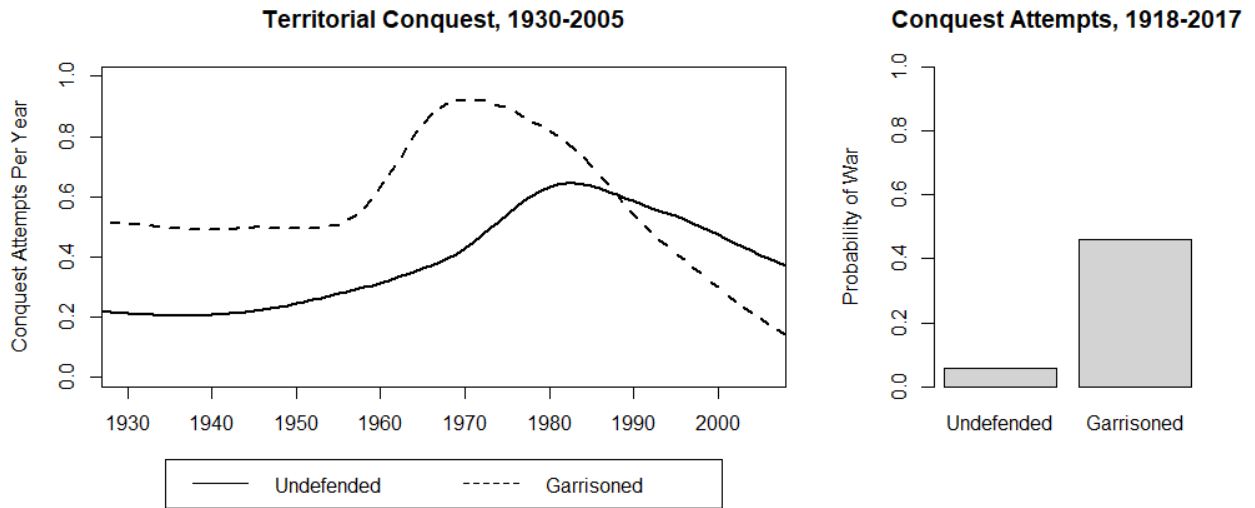
The right side of Figure 5 confirms that seizing a garrisoned territory entails a greater risk of war. With a garrison, war resulted 46 percent of the time. Without one, war only broke out six percent of the time. Unfortunately, causation here remains opaque. The presence of a garrison could cause this increase in the probability of war. Alternatively, defenders may deploy garrisons to regions that they were already more likely to violently contest for other reasons. Regardless, the ex ante presence of a garrison provides an indicator of high war risk among conquest attempts.

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<sup>50</sup> My attempt to observe whether the challenger fired first during the initial move into the territory foundered on the problem that each side often blames the other for firing that first shot. Moreover, even after a political decision to advance without firing first, front-line troops might do so regardless. Consequently, the violence variable records only whether at least one battle death occurred.

<sup>51</sup> Figure 5 provides a rare piece of quantitative evidence in favor of this longstanding assumption about tripwires. Prior studies have focused on whether tripwires get crossed, particularly in nuclear conflicts and extended deterrence situations (Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014). Figure 5, in contrast, speaks to the second implication of tripwires: tripping them makes war more likely.

**Figure 5: The Evolution of Territorial Conquest (Military Garrison)**



*Attempts to conquer entire states are excluded from Figure 5.*

The left side of Figure 5 shows that conquest attempts seizing undefended areas have proven significantly more resilient to the decline of conquest than seizures of garrisoned territories. Around 1990, seizing undefended areas became the majority for the first time, underscoring the declining war-proneness of conquest. Because garrison presence and population correlate closely, Figures 4 and 5 largely capture the same change. The strength of this correlation is interesting considering the significant number of forward military positions and posts in unpopulated border areas. It suggests that challengers generally prefer to work around garrisons by instead seizing nearby empty areas (Altman 2018). The Spratly Islands, for example, became a peculiar hodgepodge of interspersed military posts because several states gradually seized (increasingly small) islands that remained unoccupied instead of assaulting extant garrisons on larger islands (Fravel 2008, 333–35).<sup>52</sup>

Over the full 1918-2017 period, significant proportions of conquest attempts seized unpopulated territories (39 percent) and undefended territories (41 percent).<sup>53</sup> These figures suggest the existence of a large pool of conquest attempts with ambitions limited to territories whose seizure comes with a reduced risk of war. Those figures rose over time. Unpopulated territories account for 28 percent before 1980 but 60 percent since then. Undefended territories account for 31 percent before 1980 but 60 percent since then. From those trends, the picture of modern conquest starts to become clear.

Conquest has declined in aggregate in recent decades. However, the quantitative decline in the number of conquests per year has been less pronounced than the qualitative changes to the nature of conquest.<sup>54</sup> War-prone conquest declined disproportionately while war-averse conquest largely persisted, becoming the modern form of conquest.

These trends belie the conclusion that a normative constraint against forceful territorial revision virtually eradicated all forms of conquest. Nonetheless, future research might explore ways to amend the norm of territorial integrity to better correspond to the observed reality of modern conquest. Two possibilities avail themselves. First, perhaps the norm of territorial integrity grows out of the norm of self-determination. If so, seizing populous areas against the wishes of the inhabitants would violate it,

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<sup>52</sup> However, one 1988 incident did lead to violence between China and Vietnam.

<sup>53</sup> All figures in this paragraph exclude entire-state conquest attempts. Including them strengthens the disparities.

<sup>54</sup> Future qualitative research might explore the causes and process of this change in the 1975-1985 period, which does not seem to correspond to a shock to the international system (unlike 1945).

but seizing empty or sympathetic areas would not. This would evoke a degree of irony for scholarship on secession: the norm of territorial integrity directly clashes with the norm of self-determination on that issue (e.g., Zacher 2001, 219). However, the decline in seizures of populous areas with sympathetic (co-ethnic) populations provides reason to prefer the war-aversion explanation to the self-determination alternative.

Second, conquest attempts seizing ambiguous regions created by ill-defined borders account for an impressive proportion of conquest attempts in recent decades (and overall). Presumably these represent the smallest violations of a territorial integrity norm possible for conquest attempts. Future research might create new data on border ambiguities to investigate the possibility that border ambiguity caused the persistence of smaller conquests.<sup>55</sup> Even if such research finds a modified conceptualization of the territorial integrity norm that can co-exist with the reality of modern conquest, the fact that conquest events (attempts) occur five-to-ten times as frequently as suggested by past datasets must lower expectations for the explanatory power of the norm.

Finally, Figures 4 and 5 hint at a possible decline in even war-averse territorial conquest in the early twenty-first century. Time will tell if this is the beginning of a third sharp decline or merely a temporary lull. Even if the decline continues, projecting these trends forward still suggests the description of modern conquest presented here should obtain for the immediate future.

## **Conclusion: What Does Modern Conquest Look Like?**

Conquest is not gone, but it has changed. The International Relations field continues to grapple with the question of why interstate war, particularly high-intensity war and great power war, declined after 1945. This study does not settle that fundamental question. Whatever the reasons, these forces extended into the territorial realm and gradually transformed the nature of territorial conquest.

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<sup>55</sup> Observing ambiguity in a manner that achieves intercoder reliability proved sufficiently challenging that I do not present conclusions from my attempt here. The results were, in any case, inconclusive. Rather than create one dichotomous variable, I recommend that future inquiries divide ambiguity into distinct types: borders drawn precisely but differently on separate occasions, borders defined precisely but in a manner that does not match the true geography, borders described only vaguely due to use of words instead of maps, no border ever delimited, etcetera. Such an approach would allow the investigator to include/exclude controversial types of ambiguity and assess the implications.



Increasing war aversion explains the decline of the most war-prone form of conquest (entire states) after 1945, then the intermediate form (populated territories, garrisoned territories) around the 1980s, and finally the relative persistence even after then of the least war-prone form of conquest (unpopulated territories, undefended territories). Territorial conquests have not stopped occurring, but rather they have become smaller, more targeted, and less violent.

These small territorial seizures that usually do not lead to war matter more than it may first appear. Conquest remained the primary initiating event for wars after 1945 and even after 1975. There is a tension but not a contradiction between a behavior usually not leading to war and that same behavior instigating most wars. War is rare and becoming rarer. Non-territorial interstate war has never occurred frequently. Consequently, despite the war-averse nature of modern conquest attempts, conquest attempts remain central to the causes of most interstate wars. Consider, for instance, the nightmare scenario of nuclear war. To date, a pair of nuclear powers have fought each other with significant casualties on two occasions: China and the Soviet Union over Damansky Island in 1969 and India and Pakistan over Kargil in 1999. Both conflicts began with a military deployment to seize a small, unpopulated border territory.

Looking to future contingencies, perhaps the most plausible scenarios that culminate in armed conflict between China and Japan begin with the disputed Senkaku Islands, which remain unpopulated and undefended. China's disputes with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia over the Spratly Islands raise similar fears despite the multitude of small garrisons stationed there. Although the potential for a full Chinese invasion of Taiwan continues to loom, a more limited Chinese seizure of Taiwanese islands like Kinmen, Mazu, and Itu Aba better fits the mold of modern conquest. Similarly, enduring disputes surrounding China's border with India – often over remote unpopulated areas – linger as a potential source of conflict. Elsewhere, the specter of future Russian territorial advances in Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, and beyond now compete with terrorism at the top of the European security landscape. Territorial conflicts remain common in regions with newer borders, including the Middle East and Africa. Across the world, the most worrisome scenarios for interstate conflict tend to return, time and again, to small conquest attempts.

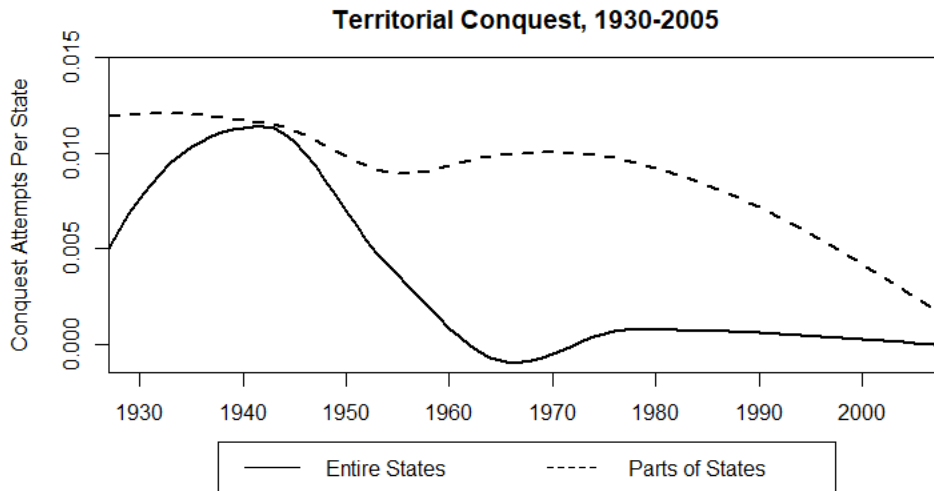
Scholars generally approach these contingencies with established lenses: as *nuclear* conflicts, as *great power* conflicts, as *coercive/bargaining* conflicts, or merely as *interstate* conflicts. It is important,

however, to remember that the most serious conflicts in the coming years quite likely will be territorial conflicts. A conquest attempt will likely serve as a crucial step toward war, if such a step is ever taken. Successfully preventing or properly managing the response to the sudden seizure of a seemingly unimportant peripheral area may well determine whether war begins. Far from the marginal phenomena that they may at first appear, attempts to get away with small conquests may prove to be the defining threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century interstate security landscape.

## **Appendix I**

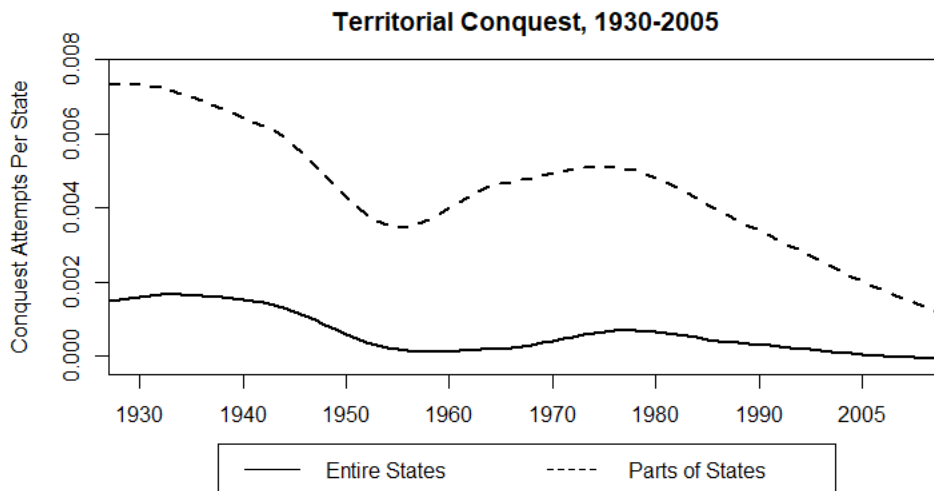
Figures 6 and 7 below display the trends in attempts to conquer entire states and parts of states after adjusting for the changing number of states over time. They modify Figures 1 and 2 by making that adjustment using data on state membership in the international system from Griffiths and Butcher (2013). Although the decline in conquest strengthens to an extent, nothing in Figures 6 or 7 invalidates the conclusions offered above.

**Figure 6: Conquest Attempts Per State (All Attempts)**



*The y-axis displays the number of conquest attempts per year divided by the number of states in the international system during that year.*

**Figure 7: Conquest Attempts Per State (Successful Attempts Only)**



*The y-axis displays the number of conquest attempts per year divided by the number of states in the international system during that year.*

## Appendix II

The choice of which territory characteristics to use as signatures of war-averse conquest relies in part on the results of the statistical analysis below. Because neither a full analysis of the conditions under which conquest attempts more often provoke war nor the inference of any causal effects therein fall within the scope of this study, I merely summarize the results in brief. Future research may take this analysis further.

Table 7 presents results from four statistical models that collectively assess the war-proneness of conquest attempts. Attempted conquests of parts of states serve as the unit of analysis. The temporal scope is 1918 to 2017. War is the dependent variable (using Correlates of War data). Retaliatory conquest attempts are excluded. Each column displays results from a logit model with the designated variables included and standard errors clustered by militarized dispute. The clustering affects only a few cases such as Egypt and Syria's invasions of Israel in 1973. The first column provides the basic model, incorporating Correlates of War military expenditures data to assess power and Polity data for regime type (Singer et al. 1972; Marshall and Jaggers 2002). The second column adds ICOW data on the strategic and natural resource value of the seized territory, sacrificing a few observations due to missing data (Hensel et al. 2008). The third column adds the garrison variable. Because the garrison variable is post-treatment to the other variables, the first three models serve to examine those variables and the fourth model to evaluate garrisons alone.

**Table 7: The Conditions Under Which Conquest Attempts More Often Lead to War, 1918-2017**

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Population	2.44 (.73)***	3.31 (1.02)***	1.40 (.75)*
Garrison			2.27 (.94)**
Ethnic Motive	-.18 (.76)	.03 (.81)	.06 (.76)
Island or Peninsula	-1.71 (.61)***	-2.23 (.80)***	-1.63 (.61)***
Colony	-2.49 (1.24)**	-2.52 (1.36)*	-2.29 (1.02)**
Power Difference	-.13 (.13)	-.04 (.17)	-.07 (.13)
Defender Regime Type	.18 (.08)**	.19 (.08)**	.24 (.09)***
Challenger Regime Type	-.00 (.08)	-.08 (.09)	.07 (.09)
Regime Type Interaction	-.01 (.01)*	-.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Natural Resources		-.90 (.72)	
Strategic Location		2.67 (.82)***	
Constant	-3.46 (1.17)***	-5.39 (1.60)***	-4.96 (1.48)**
N	84	78	84

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

*Table 7 excludes attempts to conquer entire states.*

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