

Why Territorial Disputes Escalate: The Causes of Conquest Attempts Since 1945¹

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May 22, 2022

Forthcoming in
International Studies Quarterly

Abstract

Although attempts to conquer entire states became rare after 1945, attempts to conquer small pieces of territory persisted. Why do states so often seize – and even fight wars over – remarkably small areas? We argue that traditional explanations predicated on the material or ethnic value of disputed territories largely cannot explain the escalation of territorial disputes since 1945. Instead, actors more often seize territory to be seen seizing it. We theorize that the roots of these conquest attempts often lie in careerist incentives within militaries. Military officers seize small pieces of disputed territory in pursuit of promotions or political office, especially in states where the military wields greater political power. We test this theory with a statistical analysis of conquest attempts in territorial disputes (1965-2000) using new geospatial and conquest data along with a medium-n process analysis of all conquest attempts since 1945. Our results suggest that careerist self-aggrandizement plays an important role in contemporary territorial conflict.

¹ Equal authorship — name order is alphabetical. We thank Tanisha Fazal, Ben Graham, Jamie Hinton, Michael Kenwick, Jonathan Markowitz, Jeongmin Park, Dan Reiter, Peter White, Andi Zhou, and the reviewers for their comments and insights. We are grateful to Andi Zhou, Jamie Hinton, and Michael Westberg for research assistance.

“Two bald men fighting over a comb”

–Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges on the Falklands War²

Introduction

Why do states so often risk war — in some cases, fighting and losing wars — for the seemingly paltry prize of a small border region or disputed island? Although conquest of entire states became rare after 1945 (Fazal 2007), attempted conquest of small pieces of territory persisted (Altman 2020). This study explores the puzzle inherent in this contemporary form of conquest by seeking to understand what motivates states to take such grave risks for small material rewards. Why, to borrow from Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges’s description of the Falklands War, have so many bald men so often fought over combs? Specifically, we investigate the conditions under which territorial disputes more often escalate to conquest attempts.³

Past research on territorial conflict has emphasized the value derived from possessing territories in terms of resources, production, strategic location, and ethnic kinship, among others (Markowitz 2020; Goemans and Schultz 2017; Abramson and Carter 2016; Toft 2014; Carter 2010; Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Huth and Allee 2002; Huth 1996). However, the territories seized in recent decades are often too small for these conventional explanations to satisfy.

To explain why states in territorial disputes resort to seizing territory, we advance three arguments. We argue, first, that a motive to seize — and to be seen to seize — fits the

² Parsons 2016, 60.

³ On the importance of this question for policy purposes, see, e.g., O’Hanlon 2019.

evidence better than a motive rooted in the value of the territory itself. At first glance, this evokes traditional explanations for symbolic aggression such as status dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the international community (Renshon 2016), humiliation (Barnhart 2017, 2016), and rallying public support to bolster a leader's flagging popularity (Jung 2014; Tir 2010; Kisangani and Pickering 2009; Mitchell and Prins 2004; Davies 2002). We build on but depart from these insights by emphasizing a different domestic actor.

Second, we argue that the impetus for small conquest attempts often comes from within militaries. Although drawing on theories of civil-military relations as drivers of foreign policy decisions (Kenwick 2020; Jost, Meshkin, and Schub 2022; White 2021, 2017; Horowitz and Stam 2014; Weeks 2014; Brooks 2008; Sechser 2004), we highlight a different motive.

Third, we argue that military officers – especially unit and theater commanders – are best positioned to benefit from being seen to seize small territories. This “careerist theory” emphasizes officers’ career aspirations to both military promotions and civilian leadership positions as causes of territorial conquest. We further postulate that these officers are more likely to either successfully lobby for conquest internally or seize territory on their own initiative when the military holds greater political power.⁴ Consequently, states engaged in territorial disputes will more often seize territory when their militaries have a greater role in their politics.

We test these arguments against an array of competing explanations using statistical tests and medium-n process evidence. The statistical analysis sets aside the equally important question of why territorial disputes emerge (e.g., Goemans and Schultz 2017; Abramson and Carter 2016; Carter and Goemans 2011) to focus on understanding the

⁴ For a consonant argument about colonial-era expansion, see Anderson (2019).

causes of conquest attempts in existing disputes. That is, we approach the problem of contemporary conquest much as, for example, Indian policymakers might assess the possibilities of China or Pakistan seizing disputed territory.⁵

This research design prioritizes bringing new data to the study of territorial aggression. We examine all territorial disputes for the period 1965–2000 using data from [Schultz \(2017\)](#) on the size and shape of disputed territories in the [Huth, Croco, and Appel \(2011\)](#) dataset. This enables us to incorporate geospatial data on characteristics of disputed territories such as onshore and offshore oil deposits. We use these to operationalize economic, strategic, and ethnic value explanations with greater conceptual validity and precision, a significant advance in the study of territorial disputes. Our dependent variable, conquest attempts, uses the Modern Conquest dataset ([Altman 2020](#)), which goes beyond prior datasets by including failed attempts and by identifying many more successful attempts. Lastly, we leverage new data on the military's influence in politics from [White \(2017\)](#) and [Kenwick \(2020\)](#).

We find that states in which militaries wield greater political power increase the likelihood of observing a conquest attempt. We also find evidence favoring status and diversionary explanations. In contrast, we find no evidence for the material value and ethnic explanations despite our employment of new and more precise measures. These results support the first two of the three arguments advanced above, and offer a test of the institutional half of the careerist theory.

To further test the careerist theory and distinguish it from alternative theories of how civil-military relations contribute to aggressive foreign policies, we supplement these

⁵ In subsequent discussion, we detail our reasons for conditioning on disputes rather than selecting directed-dyad and grid-square alternatives, including the causal inference challenges associated with each approach.

quantitative results with a medium-n process analysis of all 70 conquest attempts from 1945 to 2019. We find evidence that significant numbers of conquest attempts occurred 1) with military officers as the driving force in the decision to seize territory, 2) without approval from heads of state, 3) amid serious civil-military power struggles, or 4) under military regimes. We also find that 5) unit and theater commanders who led conquest attempts often later achieve high military and civilian positions.

This study makes two contributions to international relations scholarship. First, the careerist theory contributes to a growing body of knowledge about civil-military relations as a source of bellicose foreign policies (Jost, Meshkin, and Schub 2022; Horowitz and Stam 2014; Weeks 2014; Stewart and Zhukov 2009; Brooks 2008; Sechser 2004; Snyder 1984). Whereas prior literature emphasizes organizational interests and cultures, the careerist theory posits a qualitatively different motivation for aggression by focusing on individual interests: theater and front-line unit commanders' aspirations for higher rank or political office.

Second, this study sheds light on how interstate conflict unfolds differently after 1945 than before (Markowitz, Mulesky, Graham et al. 2020; Altman 2020; Lee 2018; Goertz, Diehl, and Balas 2016; Fazal 2007). Although we observe small conquests and careerist motives long before 1945 (Anderson 2019), small conquests have never been as important for international politics as they are now. It is thus all the more essential to understand their causes. We contribute to territorial conflict scholarship by substantiating the roles of officer's careerism, civil-military relations more generally, and the motive to be seen to seize territory. We furnish new evidence against economic, strategic, and ethnic motives. Because territorial conflict is so closely linked to the causes of war (Vasquez and Henehan 2001; Hensel 1996), understanding why some disputes escalate to conquest attempts is vital for explaining contemporary interstate conflict.

The Puzzle of Attempted Conquest since 1945

The puzzle of attempted conquest since 1945 is that states risk war by seizing territories seemingly too small to confer significant material benefits to their possessor. By “small,” we refer to territories that are of low material and demographic value to states. This usually means a small geographical area but also encompasses population, resources, and strategic location.

Figure 1 displays the number of conquest attempts since 1920, grouped by decade and size of the seized area. 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 sovereign control of that territory” (Altman 2020, 499). Most cross-border military operations — from raids to peacekeeping to foreign-imposed regime change — do not qualify unless accompanied by a “militarized assertion of sovereignty” over territory not previously occupied by the challenger. Conflicts where either side is a non-state actor also do not qualify, not even those that transition uninterruptedly from separatist violence to interstate conflict. We exclude ‘retaliatory’ conquest attempts retaking territory that was just seized, such as when the United Kingdom regained the Falkland Islands. These are a leading reason why conquest attempts fail. Approximately half of conquest attempts quickly lost control of the territory they seized.

Figure 1: Conquests attempts by decade and approximate size, 1920–2019

Figure 1 about here

Despite their small size, conquest attempts are dangerous. Nearly half of all interstate wars since 1945 began with a conquest attempt, and most attempts involved only small

seizures ([Altman 2020](#); [Sarkees and Wayman 2010](#)). These include the Kargil War (the only war between two nuclear powers), the Ugandan-Tanzanian War (which culminated in the overthrow of Idi Amin), and the Cambodian-Vietnamese War (which brought down the Khmer Rouge). In contrast, Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait exemplifies the kind of conquest that rarely happens anymore. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine likewise breaks the mold of contemporary conquest, but both cases underscore why most challengers aim smaller to lessen their risks and better their chances. This study focuses on investigating that vast majority of small conquest attempts.

Small size is one of the defining facts about conquest since 1945, but size features in only a small portion of thinking about territorial conflict. [Schultz and Goemans \(2019\)](#) argue that limited claims enable states to make credible demands and thus facilitates bargaining. In contrast, [Wiegand \(2011\)](#) concludes that challengers maintain small territorial claims as leverage for coercive bargaining over other issues. Neither directly implies a motive for small conquests. [Altman \(2020, 2017\)](#) establishes that – since 1945 – the dominant mode of conquest is seizing small pieces of territory while attempting to avoid war, a *fait accompli* strategy. Yet this explains opportunity, not motive. Motive remains the puzzle.

Economic, Strategic, and Ethnic Value

Explaining territorial conflict often begins with the material and demographic value of the disputed territory: its resources, production, strategic location, and ethnic kinship with its inhabitants ([Markowitz 2020](#); [Markowitz, Fariss, and McMahon 2019](#); [Goemans and Schultz 2017](#); [Abramson and Carter 2016](#); [Toft 2014](#); [Hensel and Mitchell 2005](#); [Huth and Allee 2002](#); [Huth 1996](#)). However, these causes become less compelling as the size and value of the disputed territory shrinks.

Economic value includes resources and the production of the resident population. The focus falls most on natural resources like oil as a motive, but the evidence is mixed. Some studies report that natural resources dampen conflict (Huth 1996), while others have found oil promotes conflict (Caselli, Morelli, and Rohner 2015; Colgan 2013), and still others have found little evidence consistent with the oil motive (Meierding 2020; Schultz 2017). Scholars have theorized that freshwater resources could cause interstate conflicts (Gleick 1993), finding that both climate deviations and shared rivers and correlate with militarized interstate disputes (Schmidt, Lee, and Mitchell 2021; Toset, Gleditsch, and Hegre 2000) — though Brochmann and Gleditsch (2012) challenge the latter. Extracting production from conquered populations has been rarer since 1945, but Liberman (1998) reports that Nazi Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union benefited economically from their empires during or after World War II.

Economic causes of conquest also speak to the types of states inclined to seize territory. Reliance on international trade or human capital to operate advanced technologies leave states less motivated to pursue prosperity by seizing territory (Brooks 2011; Gartzke and Rohner 2011; Simmons 2005; Rosecrance 1986). In contrast, states dependent on land-based rents have stronger incentives to do so (Markowitz, Mulesky, Graham et al. 2020; Markowitz, Fariss, and McMahon 2019). Authoritarian regimes are more prone to conquest because they are more able and motivated to extract rents from conquered territories (Wright and Diehl 2016; Lake 1992). Importantly, these arguments generally envision larger territories than those that states have typically seized since 1945.

Some territories are valuable for their strategic locations, such as proximity to military bases, invasion routes, shipping lanes, strategic choke points like the Strait of Hormuz, and outlets to the sea for landlocked states. Past research reports that states more often escalate disputes over strategic territories (Carter 2010, Huth 1996, 74, 108).

States also prize disputed territories because of ethnic ties to the inhabitants, perceptions of the boundaries of the homeland, prior historical control, and sites of religious significance (Bukh 2020; Zellman 2018; Shelef 2016; Goddard 2006; Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Hassner 2003; Huth 1996). Of these, ethnic irredentism has garnered the most scholarly interest and been shown to motivate territorial claims (Goemans and Schultz 2017). Factors that exacerbate irredentism include the ethnic homogeneity of the challenger, the ethnic homogeneity of the disputed area, the level of discrimination against that population, and the domestic political power of the ethnic group in the challenger (Maass 2020; Siroky and Hale 2017; Saideman and Ayres 2008; Huth 1996). Although we return to other pathways through which nationalism might motivate small conquests, we expect that small territories with few if any inhabitants are not compelling candidates for ethnic irredentism.

Status and Domestic Politics

If material and ethnic value cannot explain why disputes escalate to conquest attempts, perhaps leaders seize territory to garner status internationally or political advantage domestically. Either reason is consistent with the idea that the desire to be seen to seize territory matters more than the material and demographic value of the territory itself.

Scholars generally construe status as a ranking of states from higher to lower social standing (Duque 2018; Renshon 2016; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014). States invest in a variety of symbols to bolster their status, ranging from hosting Olympic Games to building high-profile weapon systems such as aircraft carriers and nuclear weapons (Sagan 1997; Eyre and Suchman 1996). Seizing territory, however limited in size and material value, could serve a similar purpose. Past scholarship suggests that three types of states are most likely to attempt conquest for status: 1) those dissatisfied with their international standing,

2) those seeking to regain a territory that was taken from them, and 3) those that recently suffered a foreign policy humiliation (Duque 2018; Barnhart 2017, 2016; Renshon 2016; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014; Lebow 2010). Nonetheless, seizing small territories may not suffice to cultivate status, and violating international norms of non-aggression and territorial integrity could damage status more than enhance it (Fazal 2007; Zacher 2001).

Alternatively, leaders might hope to gain popularity domestically via conquest. Nationalism may entice domestic audiences to accept elite justifications for seizing territory and rally behind that leader (Tir 2010). Indeed, Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands is the most discussed – and hotly contested – case of diversionary war (Fravel 2010; Oakes 2006). Leaders may turn to conquest to divert public opinion during periods of economic downturns and social unrest (Jung 2014; Mitchell and Prins 2004; Davies 2002). Several studies supportive of diversionary aggression emphasize mature democracies as the antagonists (Kisangani and Pickering 2009; Oneal and Tir 2006; Gelpi 1997). However, such regimes rarely attempt conquest.

The Careerist Theory of Conquest

Who benefits from seizing small territories? While acknowledging that conquests have multiple causes, we argue that the impetus often comes from within militaries. We develop a theory predicated on career advancement prospects for military officers under conditions of greater military power in politics.

Part I: Why Military Officers Promote Small Conquests

Commanding conquest attempts can enhance military officers' prospects for advancement both within militaries and to high civilian offices. Outside of war, officers encounter few

opportunities to demonstrate effective leadership or establish a national profile. For frontline unit and theater commanders in particular, seizing disputed territories more often furnish undeniable victories compared to other acts that initiate or escalate militarized disputes. In contrast, cross-border skirmishes and other exchanges of fire often produce casualties for both sides without clear-cut strategic success. Deterring attack through sound preparation is typically invisible or ambiguous to observers. And credit for gains from coercive threats tend to fall to national leaders or diplomats. The opportunity for an officer to gain personal renown for a victory is crucial. It is also why the careerist theory explains conquest attempts but not territorial dispute initiation. Articulating a claim to territory is not a victory; if anything, it is an admission that victory is not yet achieved. Moreover, seizing even a small region is salient due to nationalistic attachment to territory, which further magnifies the personal prestige that officers can attain by seizing territory.

We assume that military promotion tends to reward experience and victory, particularly for officers who command well-known operations but also in some cases for officers who mastermind them without exercising personal leadership. To be sure, many other factors affect promotion, including seniority, social networks among officers, political connections, ethnicity, and coup-proofing measures (Janowitz 2017; Talmadge 2015; Quinlivan 1999; Moore and Trout 1978; Huntington 1957). For senior officers, however, performance is especially important. Reiter and Wagstaff (2017) show that combat performance mattered more than social networks and coup-proofing for determining whether both German and U.S. generals were relieved of command during World War II. Research on the U.S. Army suggests that military decorations (medals) are a distinctively important correlate of promotion to general, but not to lower ranks (Peck 1994, 230).

For example, accounts credit Indian generals (and theater commanders) P. N. Hoon and M. L. Chibber with persuading Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to approve Operation Meghdoot,

the Indian occupation of Siachen in 1984 (Nair 2009, 38; Wirsing 1994, 208; Chibber 1990). Hoon commanded India's 15th Corps during the successful operation. He later became Director General of Military Operations and took over India's crucial Western Command in 1986 (Chhina 2020).⁶

Leading a conquest attempt can also earn military officers national renown that they later use to attain civilian leadership positions. For example, in 1983 Colonel Muhammadu Buhari, commander of Nigeria's 3rd division, closed the Chadian border and seized disputed islands in Lake Chad on his own initiative. Nigerian President Shehu Shagari reprimanded him for it (Adebajo 2002, 46; Akinsanya and Ayoade 2013, 272; Figs 2017), yet this success helped forge Buhari's national reputation. Several months later, a military coup led to his assumption of the presidency. He ruled until 1985. In a twist of fate, Buhari was democratically elected President of Nigeria in 2015 and reelected in 2019 (BBC News 2019).

In comparison to civilian elites, military officers are better positioned to benefit from small conquests for four reasons.⁷ First, unit and theater commanders who persuade their governments to seize territory receive credit and recognition because they command the operation. Comparably ranked civilian elites seeking advancement would not ordinarily receive public credit for an operation merely because they advocated it internally.

Second, military officers are often the only officials able to effect a conquest attempt on their own authority. Civilian elites below the cabinet level typically cannot. Notably, that

⁶ This example underscores that although the careerist theory applies most strongly to states with politically powerful militaries, it also has explanatory power for democracies with established civilian control.

⁷ Military officers may also be more prone to hawkish biases and preferences than civilians (Weeks 2014), a point to which we return.

was less true prior to modern communications technologies. Consistent with the careerist theory, [Anderson \(2019\)](#) shows that local military *and civilian* officials often acted as agents of colonial expansion beyond the wishes of central governments.

Third, although we do not dismiss domestic political motives for conquest, the civilians who can orchestrate and get credit for conquests – typically heads of state and some senior ministers – have a variety of alternatives to conquest for improving their domestic standing or odds of survival in office. They might, for instance, increase public goods provision or repress the opposition ([Svolik 2012](#); [Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson et al. 2005](#)). A military officer has no such options.⁸ Leading a successful conquest attempt grants officers a distinctively promising avenue to renown in peacetime.

Fourth, unlike civilians, military officers – especially unit commanders – have a surprisingly healthy chance of personally benefiting from attempting conquest even if that attempt ultimately fails. The *fait accompli*, the principal strategy of conquest since 1945 ([Altman 2017](#); [2020](#)), suits the ambitions of unit commanders because it usually begins with a headline-grabbing success even when it eventually fails. Unit commanders can receive credit for bold initial gains, which the element of surprise makes likely.

In itself, the careerist incentive to conquer is ubiquitous. The theory thus resembles diversionary war theory, where politicians' desire to improve their domestic standing is potentially universal.⁹ Yet, just as diversion scholars specify conditions like domestic unrest and recession that magnify the diversionary motive, the careerist theory must do so too to usefully explain variation in conquest attempts. The most important such conditions are

⁸ We thank Alex Weisiger for this point.

⁹ For another example, nationalism is also so pervasive that it approaches ubiquity, but we do not doubt its contributions to causing conquest.

institutional constraints on whether individual officers can both enact and benefit from seizing territory, as the next section explores.

Furthermore, it stands to reason that officers with particularly high levels of personal ambition will more often seize territory where less ambitious officers would not do so.¹⁰ Where other officers might play it safe and pursue promotion by simply following orders, unusually ambitious officers can use conquest to earn a national reputation that can accelerate their careers to far greater heights, including political positions outside the military.

Importantly, however, the careerist theory does not require that officers behave with consciously self-serving motives. According to [Halperin and Clapp \(2007, 85-86\)](#), “Military officers are concerned about reaching flag or general officer rank... [They do not] see any contradiction between their quest for advancement and the quest for national security, believing that the government and the nation will benefit from their services at higher levels.” Particularly when combined with motivated reasoning ([Snyder 1984](#)), this predisposition allows ambitious officers who wish to advance their own interests by seizing territory to believe that they concomitantly serve their nation.

Part II: Institutional Constraints

The theory thus far posits that officers sometimes champion conquest to advance their careers. Equally importantly, we argue that these officers are more likely to translate preferences for conquest into policy when militaries wield greater political power. That happens through three channels.

¹⁰ We do not attempt to test this implication of the theory due to the difficulty of observing *ex ante* personal ambition.

Powerful militaries insulate officers who act without orders: The starkest cases of careerist conquest emerge when military officers seize territory without orders from civilian leaders.¹¹ Powerful militaries constrain civilian oversight and seek to preserve institutional prerogatives. Under such circumstances, officers who seize territory without orders can more likely expect that civilians will meet resistance if they attempt to punish them. This lowers the risks of insubordination. Although theater and unit commanders are not likely to seize large territories or intentionally start wars through this channel, neither precludes deploying troops into smaller disputed areas.

Policy dysfunction during civil-military power struggles: When militaries have greater political power, military leaders often engage in power struggles with civilian elites.¹¹ Such regimes are more prone to aggression in part because they are unusually susceptible to strategic miscalculations ([White 2021](#); [Brooks 2008](#)).

Although power struggles can lead to acting without orders, the crux of the second channel is distinct. Power struggles obstruct deliberations about the relative priority of territorial interests versus other domestic and foreign interests. Officers will more often mislead civilian leaders about key aspects of military decisions to get their desired outcomes or assert military prerogatives, such as by withholding vital information ([Brooks 2008](#)). Moreover, civilians may approve operations pitched by hawkish officers because they fear angering them by refusing. Civilians may prefer to yield to officers on foreign policy issues rather than concede on issues of domestic politics or governance.

¹¹ On methods for resisting legitimate orders: [Halperin and Clapp 2007](#), 254-91. On military disobedience of civilian orders: [Hundman 2021](#); [Hundman and Parkinson 2019](#). This can arise when civilians or rival military organizations are divided against each other ([Avant 1994](#); [De Bruin 2018](#)).

More receptive leadership under military rule: Direct rule by a military dictator or junta also provides a favorable institutional environment for conquest. Although military regimes suppress the first two channels, these regimes also lower the hurdles obstructing pro-conquest officers from influencing national policy. Officers will have stronger personal connections with military rulers than civilians. The degrees of separation will be fewer, and the odds of a personal relationship existing will be higher than in civilian regimes. Officers can also expect a more sympathetic reception from military leaders, in part because they know better how to appeal to them. Overall, we expect that military officers seeking to benefit from acting as conquest entrepreneurs will succeed more often as the military's power relative to civilians increases.

The careerist theory is distinct from existing civil-military theories of aggression even as it draws important elements from several. Most importantly, it differs by emphasizing the interests and agency of individual officers rather than military rulers or militaries as institutions. However, the theory incorporates [Brooks \(2008\)](#)'s insights into how civil-military power struggles lead to aggressive foreign policies. Similarly, although the third channel underscores the importance of military rule in line with existing scholarship ([Weeks 2014, 2012](#); [Lai and Slater 2006](#)), the other two channels operate outside of it. We will present both statistical and process evidence that military rule alone does not explain the contribution of politically powerful militaries to conquest attempts since 1945.

The careerist theory is hardest to empirically distinguish from the argument that officers' hawkish biases lead them to support conquest. An impressive body of research concludes that military officers tend to be more hawkish than civilians ([Lupton 2022](#); [Jost, Meshkin, and Schub 2022](#); [Horowitz and Stam 2014](#); [Weeks 2014, 2012](#); [Stewart and](#)

Zhukov 2009; Sechser 2004; Snyder 1984).¹² Officers may seize territory due to careerist ambition, hawkish views, or a combination thereof. We cannot observe their motives.¹³ Some versions of the hawkishness argument emphasize the role of militaries' institutional interests and priorities (Sechser 2004; Snyder 1984). If so, seniormost military leaders and general staffs should serve as conquest entrepreneurs. They should seek large conquests, because small conquests do not eliminate a growing threat or reshape the military's role in politics. They are better suited to enhancing the careers of individual officers, especially unit and theater commanders. In the process analysis, we examine the ranks of the officers who acted as conquest entrepreneurs to try to distinguish careerism from hawkishness. Similarly, Weeks (2014, 24-29) presents a theory of military hawkishness that emphasizes the agency of national leaders, whereas the careerist theory instead emphasizes officers within the ranks.

Nonetheless, Weeks (2014) and others posit a more general hawkishness among military officers rooted in both socialization and the propensity of hawkish individuals to join militaries. This poses the most difficult challenge for empirical differentiation from careerist motives, especially because the two can interact and reinforce each other. The process evidence will provide suggestive indirect support for the careerist theory by showing that conquest attempts lead to positive career outcomes for officers who command them. However, the statistical analysis will more unequivocally support the broader claim that civil-military relations — and specifically politically powerful militaries — play an

¹² Other scholars disagree, averring that officers are cautious about using force (Feaver and Gelpi 2005; Betts 1991; Huntington 1957). Ghiselli (2020) notes that militaries prefer to prioritize traditional security threats such as territorial disputes.

¹³ Nor can we trust any accounts these officers provide. They face strong incentives to claim to serve the national interest, not self-interest.

important role in explaining why territorial disputes have escalated to conquest attempts since 1945.

Assessing Explanations for Conquest Attempts since 1945

We test these theories with both quantitative and medium-n process approaches. We begin with a statistical analysis of the causes of conquest attempts in territorial disputes from 1965 to 2000. Data on conquest attempts, discussed previously, come from the Modern Conquest dataset ([Altman 2020](#)).

A statistical analysis of conquest attempts could take any of three basic forms, each with advantages and disadvantages. First, in the mold of many studies on interstate conflict generally, the analysis could examine directed dyads. However, economic, strategic, and ethnic value explanations require characteristics of the disputed territories themselves as explanatory variables. An approach that aggregates to the level of states or dyads hinders using such variables. They would necessarily be measured as characteristics of the defender's entire territory or entire region proximate to the challenger, rather than as characteristics of specific smaller areas. Consequently, we prefer the other approaches.

Second, some recent conflict studies (e.g., [Schultz 2017](#); [Goemans and Schultz 2017](#)) use a geographic grid cell approach. However, such a design requires precise knowledge about the location and spatial extent of conquest attempts, and this information is not available in existing datasets.¹⁴ Moreover, this approach would not necessarily offer a causal identification advantage over alternatives, because there are potential selection effects

¹⁴ Conquest attempts often seize only a small part of a disputed territory, and mapping failed attempts poses significant challenges.

surrounding the locations of existing borders just as there are for territorial disputes.¹⁵ The grid cell approach would also be vulnerable to threats to inference stemming from the modifiable areal unit problem. This issue arises when multiple theoretically plausible areal units exist; in those cases, alternative scales or zonings of geography can generate very different conclusions about the relationships between variables (Lee, Rogers, and Soifer 2020; Amrhein 1995; Openshaw 1984). Finally, such an approach would investigate the size of conquest attempts (because larger attempts seize more cells) in addition to their occurrence, which is not the task at hand.

The third approach — which we employ — conditions on existing territorial disputes. Our design allows us to investigate why some territorial disputes escalate into conquest attempts while others do not. This decision also reflects our puzzle-driven interest in conquest rather than dispute initiation and follows a long tradition in the study of territorial conflict (Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Huth and Allee 2002). Excluding non-disputes permits us to focus on cases of most interest to policymakers, who worry more about whether flashpoints like the Spratly and Senkaku Islands will ignite armed conflicts than why they began decades previously. From an empirical standpoint, most conquest attempts occur within the context of a territorial dispute. From 1945 to 2000, 55 of 64 conquests attempts involved disputed territory according to Huth and Allee (2002), and we believe the remaining nine could reasonably be coded as territorial disputes. That said, we are cautious not to generalize our results beyond the context of territorial disputes. This underscores the importance and complementarity of studies examining the causes of territorial disputes.

¹⁵ We acknowledge that perfect causal identification is not possible for any of the three possible approaches, but we believe the importance of question justifies its study with observational methods.

Specifically, our unit of analysis is the challenger-dispute-year. It includes all territorial disputes active during 1965–2000.¹⁶ Our dispute data come from Huth, Croco, and Appel's update of Huth and Allee's territorial dispute data (Huth, Croco, and Appel 2011; Huth and Allee 2002). A dispute features a challenger contesting some or all of the territory of a defender. When neither state possesses the territory, both states can be challengers. Territorial disputes drop out of our data once they have been resolved.

Although we eschew the grid cell approach, geospatial data is central to our research design. Specifically, we incorporate new GIS data on the size and shape of territorial claims from Schultz (2017)'s Mapping Interstate Territorial Conflict (MITC) dataset, which estimates the location and boundaries of all territorial disputes in the updated Huth and Allee dataset. Geospatial data represent a significant advance in the study of territorial disputes because they enable us to measure economic, strategic, and ethnic value with greater conceptual validity and spatial precision. Prior studies often rely on binary indicators of, for instance, economic or resource value (Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Huth 1996).

We specify a separate, customized model for each explanation for attempted conquest, estimating parsimonious models designed to minimize omitted variable bias while avoiding multicollinearity and post-treatment bias. In all models, we lag predictors whenever reverse causality is a concern. Because some states are challengers in multiple disputes, we cluster our standard errors by challenger. All models include duration as a cubic polynomial to account for possible temporal dependence (Carter and Signorino 2010). For ease of interpretation and comparison, we standardize all continuous variables to have mean 0 and

¹⁶ Although the Modern Conquest dataset covers a larger time period, territorial dispute data cover the period 1945–2000, and data for the main explanatory variable of interest covers 1964–2008. We therefore constrain our analysis to the years common to these three data sources.

standard deviation 1 and present average marginal effects plots. Regression tables and summary statistics are available in the appendix, which also provides full bibliographic information and the procedures for constructing our measures.

Economic, Strategic, and Ethnic Value

We begin by assessing the effect of economic, strategic, and ethnic value by using MITC dispute data to enable us to apply other geospatial data. We operationalize economic value using five geospatial measures. First, we measure the disputed area's average LUMINOSITY, defined as nighttime lights visible from space, as a proxy for economic activity. Second, we include the size of the POPULATION in the disputed territory. Luminosity and population data come from the PRIO-GRID project. Third, we use data on onshore and offshore PETROLEUM deposits to calculate an original measure of the total area of oil and gas *implicated* in the disputed area. For offshore deposits, we estimate whether international law would assign sovereign rights based on continental shelves. Fourth, we compute a binary indicator for whether the territory contains VALUABLE MINERALS such as gold, diamond, or gem deposits. Fifth, FRESHWATER incorporates geospatial data on both freshwater availability in the disputed territory and water scarcity in the challenger into a single measure of the motive to acquire freshwater.

As previously discussed, some types of states are more likely to engage in profit-motivated aggression than others. We account for those explanations by including the challenger state's GDP PER CAPITA (logged), ECONOMIC STRUCTURE (a binary indicator for dependence on natural resource or agriculture rents), and its degree of electoral DEMOCRACY using V-Dem. We include all three in the same model along with likely confounders.

We create two measures to capture strategic value. MARITIME CHOKE POINTS are natural congestion points that connect two larger bodies of water along major shipping routes, such as the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz. This variable takes value 1 if the disputed territory lies within 100 kilometers of a maritime choke point. SEA ACCESS is a binary indicator that captures whether a landlocked challenger would gain an outlet to the sea.

We also measure ethnic and homeland value. Our ETHNIC KIN indicator takes value 1 if an ethnic group in government in the challenger state has a kin group in the disputed territory. We use Shelef's dichotomous HOMELAND variable, which is based on domestic discourse about the territory (Shelef 2016).

Figure 2: Effects of economic, strategic, and ethnic value on conquest attempts (separate models)

Figure 2 about here

Average marginal effects appear in Figure 2. Across all our models, we see remarkably little evidence that states are more likely to attempt conquest when disputing materially or ethnically valuable territories. Only population is statistically distinguishable from 0, and its sign is the opposite of what value logic predicts. Sea access is omitted because no conquest attempt seized a territory providing it. Conditional on an existing dispute, the value explanations do not explain why states *seize* disputed territory. This supports our claim that these motives do not drive seizure in existing disputes. Notably, however, these null results do not address the separate question of whether value causes states to *dispute* territory.

Status and Diversion

Could a motive to be seen to seize territory drive the escalation of disputes into conquest attempts? We conduct a similar analysis to test status and diversion explanations. We measure STATUS DISSATISFACTION using data from [Renshon \(2016\)](#). This indicator measures the difference between a state's diplomatic status, based on the number of diplomats received, and its material status, based on its material capabilities. Higher values indicate greater status dissatisfaction, which should correlate with a higher probability of attempting conquest. We also capture revanchism and humiliation. States that recently suffered involuntary territorial losses may be more likely to attempt to counteract those status losses by seizing territory.¹⁷ We follow [Barnhart \(2017\)](#) in coding revanchism as 1 in cases where a challenger involved in a territorial dispute lost territory to the defender in the previous 20 years, and 0 otherwise. We code HUMILIATION similarly, except that the challenger lost territory to a state other than the defender. To capture diversionary motives, we use ECONOMIC GROWTH rate and incidents of MASS UNREST.

Figure 3 shows the results. Higher levels of status dissatisfaction increase the likelihood of a conquest attempt. Consistent with diversion, low economic growth dampens the probability of conquest. Mass unrest increases it.

Figure 3: Effect of status and diversion on conquest attempts (separate models)

Figure 3 about here

An additional test also yields suggestive evidence favoring diversion. We searched for cases where public opinion polls captured leader approval before and after conquest attempts. Unfortunately, because most challengers were non-Western autocracies and most

¹⁷ However, Barnhart does not report this effect after 1945.

conquest attempts occurred decades ago, polling data were available in only three cases. First, Ecuadorian President Sixto Durán-Ballén benefited from the groundswell of nationalism that the 1995 Cenepa War provoked. His approval rating rose from about 25 percent to about 80 percent, gradually receding back to its former level over ten months (Carlin, Hartlyn, Hellwig et al. 2020). Second, recently-elected Greek Prime Minister Kostas Simitis saw his 80 percent approval rating drop to 36 percent after a 1996 crisis with Turkey. Greece deployed marines to Imia, a disputed islet (Jacobides 2007). Turkey countered by seizing an empty islet nearby. The crisis ended when both withdrew. Third, Russian President Vladimir Putin's popularity rose by approximately twenty percent after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and did not quickly dissipate (Hale 2018).

Taken together, the evidence thus far supports the conclusion that the motive to be seen to seize territory, rather than the seized territory's characteristics, is an important explanation for conquest since 1945.

Careerist Incentives and Civil-Military Institutions

We now turn to testing our second argument: the impetus for conquest attempts often comes from within militaries. We expect to observe that challengers in territorial disputes more often attempt conquest when the military has greater influence in politics.

We measure MILITARY INFLUENCE using data from White (2017)'s Military Participation in Government dataset. White codes the proportion of a country's executive branch bodies (such as state councils and cabinets) made up of active-duty and retired military officers. This measure excludes the state leaders and non-executive institutions such as legislatures. We assume that a greater military presence in executive branch institutions implies that the military wields more political power. As a shorthand, we refer to this measure as military cabinet share.

We sought to mitigate two threats to inference: reverse causality and omitted variable bias. It could be that conquest attempts increase military power within governments. Although some scholars have shown that international conflict tends to reduce military involvement in government ([White 2017](#); [Piplani and Talmadge 2016](#); [Desch 1999](#)), [Kim \(2019, 2018\)](#) reports that sustained territorial threats make military rule more likely. To address the concern that conquest attempts could cause militaries to gain political power (rather than the reverse), we lag military cabinet share. This prevents our results from capturing direct effects of conquest attempts on militaries' political power, because a conquest attempt in 2020 cannot cause changes in civil-military institutions in 2019. However, lagging does not rule out the potential for complex causal relationships between territorial disputes and domestic politics over longer periods ([Gibler 2012](#)).

With respect to omitted variable bias, we control for two sets of potential confounders. The first is regime type. Military influence in politics is conceptually distinct from but correlated with autocracy, and their relationship could be problematic for our analysis. We include the DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGER variable described previously. The second set are the factors that are related to the propensity of conflict escalation more generally. Here, our primary concern is accounting for RELATIVE CAPABILITY, defined as the challenger's share of dyadic military expenditures. We include these variables in Figure 4's "select controls" model.

Prior literature recognizes that other factors — especially alliances, nuclear deterrence, and previous conflict history — affect the likelihood of conflict escalation. However, unlike the "select controls," we have less prior reason to expect a correlation with the explanatory variable (military cabinet share), which is a prerequisite for omitted variable bias. We therefore specify an additional "all controls" model that includes the select controls and adds variables capturing whether the defending state is an ally of a superpower (U.S. ALLY and

USSR/RUSSIA ALLY), whether the defending state possesses nuclear weapons (NUCLEAR DEFENDER), and a measure capturing the number of FATAL MIDS in the dyad in the previous 50 years.

We present full results in Figure 4. We find that greater military influence in politics is associated with a higher probability of a conquest attempt. We then add the potential confounders, but only prior conflict history predicts a greater likelihood that a territorial dispute escalates to a conquest attempt.

What is the substantive interpretation of the results? Imagine a country that experienced a one standard deviation increase in military participation in government. In a 20-person cabinet, this amounts to an increase of three officers. In turn, this shift increases the probability of a conquest attempt by about 0.5%. The seemingly small effect is unsurprising: like war, conquest is a rare phenomenon unlikely to occur in any given year – yet highly consequential for conflict if it does occur. Indeed, our analysis may understate the true effect of careerist incentives on conquest because our measure does not fully capture the multiple channels through which those incentives operate.

We then replicate our analyses using an alternative measure of military influence in politics. Kenwick (2020)'s dynamic measure incorporates both the institutional structure of civil-military relations and norms of civilian control that consolidate over time; we invert this measure such that higher values indicate greater military control in politics. As Figure 4 indicates, our results remain robust.

Figure 4: Effect of military influence on conquest attempts

Figure 4 about here

Finally, we run an additional analysis as a step toward distinguishing between the careerist theory and other civil-military theories of aggression. Thus far, the results support the broader claim that politically powerful militaries contribute to causing conquest attempts in territorial disputes since 1945. This analysis directly tested the second (institutional) part of our theory. It remains to test the first (careerist ambitions), which requires adjudicating between different civil-military explanations. Specifically, although the careerist theory includes the claim that military rule creates a more permissive institutional environment for conquest, it is important for the theory that military rule alone does not drive the results because two of the three channels operate outside of it.

To assess this possibility, we include autocratic regime type dummies (omitting nonautocracy) from three typologies: [Geddes, Wright, and Frantz \(2014\)](#); [Weeks \(2012\)](#); and [Lai and Slater \(2006\)](#). Each dataset defines regime categories differently. If our military influence variable still has explanatory power after controlling directly for regime type, then we can conclude that military influence operates not solely through military rule. We control for relative capability.

Figure 5: Effect of military influence on conquest attempts, controlling for autocracy

Figure 5 about here

Figure 5 shows the results. While our coefficients are slightly smaller once we include the regime variables, military influence still exerts an independent effect on conquest attempts. In contrast, military regimes are not associated with a greater propensity for conquest attempts. Together, these findings point to an explanatory pathway distinct from autocratic aggression and direct military rule.

Process Evidence

To increase our confidence that military officers' career ambitions motivate conquest, we search for process evidence for or against our argument by investigating all 70 conquest attempts from 1945 to 2019.¹⁸ We assess five observable implications of the careerist theory by confirming the presence or absence of the following events for each conquest attempt. Four are direct implications of the argument: 1) officers championing conquest in internal policy processes, 2) officers seizing territory without orders from the head of state, 3) serious power struggles between civilian and military leaders, and 4) rule by a military dictator or junta. We further assess one indirect observable implication: 5) officers who led conquest attempts achieved military promotions and/or high civilian offices. These observable implications both test the careerist theory and aid in differentiating it from other civil-military explanations. Summaries for all 70 cases are available in our replication materials.

This process evidence supplement acts as a set of "hoop tests" for our argument.¹⁹ Evidence that these events rarely or never preceded conquest attempts would invalidate our argument and suggest that our statistical result is spurious. However, observing these events before conquest attempts is insufficient to confirm the careerist theory. Collecting process evidence requires us to select on the dependent variable; we therefore leave comparisons between conquest and non-conquest cases to the statistical analysis. The value of this negative test lies in establishing the presence of necessary criteria for our argument.

¹⁸ On process evidence's value, see [Goertz and Mahoney \(2012, 103–09\)](#) and [Brady and Collier \(2010\)](#). Our approach does not retain all the advantages of in-depth case studies, but it better suits our "how much" research question because any single case could be an aberration.

¹⁹ [Mahoney \(2012, 574-75\)](#); [Van Evera \(1997, 31\)](#).

Because they implicate different channels, we do not expect to observe all of these events in the same cases. Instead, the presence of at least one versus none is a standard more consistent with the theory. Importantly, missing data are common for several process variables. Although some conquest attempts are extensively documented, even confirming the occurrence of others is challenging. Determining who lobbied for and led them was not feasible in many cases. We summarize the results in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Process evidence summary

	Yes	No	Unknown	% Yes (% of Known Cases)	% Yes (% of All Cases)
Military championing	18	18	34	50%	26%
Without orders	8	35	27	19%	11%
Civ-mil power struggles	12	51	7	19%	17%
Military rule	15	50	5	23%	21%
At least one of the above	22	10	38	69%	41%

Note: “Known cases” are those for which data were available for that variable. “All cases” percentages include “unknown” cases (missing data for that variable) in the denominator. In the bottom row, cases with missing data on *any* of the four variables are excluded except in the last column, which includes them.

Military Officer Championing: Relying on secondary sources, we record when one or more military officers served as the driving force promoting conquest in internal policy processes. Routine military planning does not qualify. Because officer-championed conquest is a key piece of our argument, failing to observe such advocacy would be especially damaging for our claims.

We found sufficient evidence to credit military officers as the primary champions for conquest in 18 cases.²⁰ In contrast, we could instead pinpoint civilians as champions in another 18 cases. Therefore, setting aside cases where information was insufficient to identify a champion, we identified military championing in 50% (18/36) of cases for which data on the process variables were available, which is 26% (18/70) of all cases. Because officer championing is distinct from championing by civilians including heads of states, foreign ministries, political parties, and domestic lobbies, we regard 50% as a high rate.

For example, in 1976 Argentina seized the small South Atlantic island of Thule, part of the Sandwich Islands (separate from the Falkland Islands), from Britain. Naval Captain Juan Jose Lombardo initially proposed the operation in 1974 ([MercoPress 2019](#)). Two civilian

²⁰ We include officers who acted without orders as champions.

governments refused. Only following a 1976 coup did the military junta that overthrew Isabel Peron approve it ([Pion-Berlin 1985](#)).

The careerist theory distinctively predicts championing by front-line theater and unit commanders. The identities of these champions helps to distinguish between different civilmilitary explanations. Championing by officers such as army chiefs of staff is consistent with prior theories' emphasis on hawkish ideologies and biases within militaries that affect institutional priorities (though championing by an army chief of staff is also consistent with the careerist theory if he harbors political ambitions or functions as part of the transmission belt from an unrecorded junior champion to the decision to conquer). In seven of the 18 cases of military championing, the champion was a seniormost military leader. In eight the champion was a theater or front-line unit commander (53%).²¹ This tentatively suggests that the careerist theory has an important role to play, but prior civil-military theories also contribute to explaining why the impetus for conquests often comes from within militaries.

Acting Without Orders: We found eight cases of military officers seizing territory without orders. This compares to 35 cases where sources indicate that the head of state sanctioned the conquest attempt. Acting without orders thus accounts for 19% of cases where information was available and 11% of all cases. Given the extraordinary nature of conquest without orders, this proportion is noteworthy.

For example, a 1995 Ecuadorian military operation against Peru's Base Norte provoked the Cenepa War. President Sixto Durán-Ballén was informed only after it was underway and expressed opposition to it initially ([Mares and Palmer 2012](#), 78; [Herz and Nogueira 2002](#), 45-46). The irony is that Durán-Ballén's approval rating benefited greatly from this conflict, as discussed previously.

²¹ In three cases, sources were not clear who within the military championed conquest.

In 1978, Ugandan officers upset by possible Tanzanian support for mutinous Ugandan soldiers crossed the border and attacked the villages of Mutukula and Munziro in the Kagera Salient. President Idi Amin had claimed the Kagera Salient as Ugandan territory. Under pressure from hawkish officers and unwilling to lose the support of more of his military, Amin declined to denounce them (Roberts 2014, 695; Mambo and Schofield 2007, 312-13). He instead deployed additional forces to occupy the salient. Tanzania counterattacked, eventually removing him from power.

Civil-Military Power Struggles: We found serious civil-military power struggles preceding 12 conquest attempts and established their absence prior to 51, which amounts to 19% (12/63) of cases where information was available and 17% (12/70) of all cases. These power struggles involve intense disputes over who should rule or make major policy decisions such as attempted military coups. Political leaders' attempts to sack top generals also qualify as power struggles. For example, Thai forces advanced into the Three-Village Border Region – disputed with Laos – in 1984. At the time, Thai politics were riven by a power struggle between Prime Minister Prem Tinasulanond and Supreme Commander Arthit Kamlang-ek over whether military officers could simultaneously hold political office (Vichit-Vadakan 1985, 237-39).

The Pakistani Military Operations Directorate drew up plans to seize heights in Kargil by the 1980s, but at least two Pakistani leaders rejected proposals to launch the operation (Abbas 2015, 170; Jalal 2014, 302). Amid intense power struggles as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sought to fill senior military posts with preferred candidates (Rizvi 2000, 211), a group of generals led by Pervez Musharraf arranged the operation soon after Musharraf became Chief of Army Staff in 1998. The evidence indicates that these generals did brief Sharif. However, they seriously underrepresented the operation's scope and informed him only after it was already underway (Zehra 2018; Abbas 2015, 171-72; Jalal 2014, 303). When

Indian forces ejected the Pakistani soldiers, Sharif declined to escalate the conflict. He moved to sack the generals responsible for the debacle. Unwilling to cooperate, they removed him from power in a coup that ended with Musharraf as President (Zehra 2018).

Military Rule: Military regimes (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014) undertook 15 conquest attempts, whereas other regimes accounted for 50, amounting to 23% (15/65) of cases where information was available and 21% (15/70) of all cases. In 1993, for example, Nigerian General Sani Abacha took power in a coup and seized territory in Bakassi, disputed with Cameroon, a month later (Lukong 2011, 26; Cornwell 2006, 26).

Overall, we confirmed the presence of at least one of the four direct types of process evidence in 29 cases. We confirmed the absence of all four in only ten. Although the underlying denominator for those figures is 70 conquest attempts (of which 29 cases is 41%), no data are missing for any of the four types of process evidence in only 32 cases. Among those 32 cases, at least one of the four types of process evidence was present in 22 (69%), as shown in Table 1. Taken together with our regression results, this prevalence increases our confidence in both the civil-military roots of post-1945 conquest generally and the careerist theory in particular. Nonetheless, it is important to make clear that we do not claim the theory explains 69% of conquest attempts. We acknowledge that the evidence reveals that many conquest attempts lack careerist roots. No single theory can fully explain this phenomenon.

Career Outcomes: Finally, we assess whether the officers who led conquest attempts later attained military promotions and high political offices. High political office includes heads of state, membership in cabinets and politburos, positions in national legislatures, and ambassadorships. Because we make no claim that all these officers orchestrated these conquest attempts, we regard this as indirect evidence for the careerist theory. We include

up to one unit commander and one theater commander per conquest attempt.²² Under no circumstances do we include an army chief of staff or comparably ranked officer. These restrictions leave a set of 25 officers who led initial military operations seizing territory: 16 unit commanders and 9 theater commanders.

This analysis should be treated with caution. Data on individual officers were frequently unobtainable, and records are plausibly more likely to exist for officers who later achieved prominence. Moreover, we reiterate that these results lack clear counterfactuals. That is especially important for military promotions, which would more likely have occurred regardless of the conquest attempt.

²² We exclude officers in cases where an army chief of staff personally commanded the operation. We exclude unit commanders when several had equally central roles in initial offensives.

Table 2: Career outcomes for unit and theater commanders who led conquest attempts

	Yes	No	Unknown	% Yes (Known Outcomes)	% Yes (All Outcomes)
Military Promotion	12	8	5	60%	48%
<i>Successes only</i>	7	2	3	78%	58%
High Civilian Office	10	10	5	50%	40%
<i>Successes only</i>	6	3	3	67%	50%

Note: “Known outcomes” are those for which officer outcomes data were available. “All outcomes” percentages include officers for whom career outcomes data were not available in the denominator. Officers that could not be identified are excluded.

Those caveats notwithstanding, Table 2 shows that we found significant rates of military promotions (60% of cases with known outcomes; 48% of all identified officers) and – more surprisingly – high political offices (50% of cases with known outcomes; 40% of all identified officers). In successful attempts, 78% of officers with known outcomes achieved promotions (58% of all identified officers). 67% later obtained high political offices (50% of all identified officers).²³ For example, Lieutenant General J. N. Chaudhuri commanded India’s successful invasion of Goa in 1961. He became Army Chief of Staff in 1962. Impressively, five of the twelve unit commanders went on to achieve a rank of (or comparable to) army chief of staff. Although failed conquest attempts led to some negative outcomes – one officer died in battle and another was executed – a surprising number of unit commanders emerged from failures with strong career trajectories.

Conclusion

Conquests since 1945 typically involve seizures of small territories, yet their small size does not mean that these conquests are unimportant for international politics. Instead, small

²³ Success means the state still held the seized area at the end of the militarized dispute.

conquest attempts remain among the most important causes of interstate war, making it all the more important to understand their causes.

This study casts doubt on several leading explanations for contemporary conquest. More than the value of the disputed territory itself, our research suggests that the benefits of being seen to seize territory motivate challengers. Conquest is a visible, salient event that taps into nationalism and offers a potential path to improved status, especially domestically and within militaries.

We doubt that careerist aggression is unique to the post-1945 period, nor to territorial conquest. We expect our argument to explain conquest attempts before 1945 and to have non-territorial applications, two fruitful areas for future research. Nonetheless, the conspicuousness of territorial seizures as public victories, the high salience of territorial stakes, and – most of all – the small size of the seized territories make our argument especially well-suited to understanding conquest attempts since 1945, because unit and theater commanders are best positioned to benefit from them.

Our findings have important implications for the study of interstate conflict. These conquests often occurred because military officers took matters into their own hands to promote their personal interests, either acting without orders or successfully lobbying their superiors. While international relations scholarship often focuses on the state, major state institutions, or national leaders, our research highlights the underappreciated but vital role that agents within militaries play in international aggression. Enabled by higher levels of military involvement in government, careerism helps to explain where, how, and why territorial conquest attempts are likely to occur in the coming years.

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