



Territory and Conflict: Island Disputes vs. Continental Disputes

By Philip Streich / *Issue Briefings* 17 / 2017

Territorial disputes are the most frequently cited cause of wars in history, but do states fight as frequently over islands? This article shows that island disputes are less likely to escalate into deadly conflict.

China's militarization of the Spratly Islands has included the installation of weapons systems, airstrips, helipads, barracks, and other infrastructure. These actions, coupled with rival claimants' responses and other developments in the maritime area, have given rise to many discussions about the increasing possibility of military conflict in the region. Even conflict short of an all-out war could have great ramifications for trade and cooperation in the region. Adding to this possibility, China has reportedly begun work that could possibly replicate the military buildup in the Paracel Islands.¹

There is strong, established empirical support for the link between territorial disputes and the outbreak of interstate wars. Covering 177 wars from 1648 to 1989, Holsti finds that territorial issues are cited more than any other reason, and Vasquez shows that territorial disputes have been played a role in 80–90% of all wars.² Simply put, territorial disputes are the most frequently cited factor in the start of interstate wars.

Yet not all territorial disputes are created equal, which begs the question: Do territorial disputes over islands escalate as much as those over continental territory? Islands are on average more difficult to access and defend for most of the world's militaries. They also tend to be very small and have less resources than continental territory, so whatever makes states fight over territory might have less of an effect when the disputed territory is an island. This is not meant to downplay the great material value attached to particular islands in the South China Sea, particularly given their potential role in supporting claims to maritime resources if claimants can exercise sovereignty over the islands. There are an estimated 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas under the seabed and valuable (though depleting) fisheries in the waters around the disputed islands.³ However, there is undoubtedly greater value attached to continental territory, which typically not only possesses great material

¹ Greg Torode, "China begins new work on disputed South China Sea island," Reuters, March 14, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-china-paracels-idUSKBN16L2SS> (accessed September 26, 2017).

² Kalevi Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and the International Order 1648–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1991); John Vasquez, *The War Puzzle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³ Council of Foreign Relations, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/territorial-disputes-in-the-south-china-sea> (accessed September 26, 2017).



resources but also intangible salience such as serving as homeland territory.

This article addresses this topic with a statistical analysis using the Issues Correlates of War (ICOW) dataset.⁴ The ICOW project collects data on all territorial claims between 1816 and 2001 and integrates Correlates of War (COW) data (Palmer et al. 2015) on wars and militarized interstate disputes.⁵ Militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) are a level of conflict escalation that falls short of the definition of war. Overall, the analyses show that island disputes are less likely to escalate to war than continental territorial disputes. Island disputes are also less likely to escalate into MIDs with military fatalities. Island disputes however are roughly equally likely to experience non-fatal MIDs as continental territorial disputes.

The ICOW data only goes up to 2001 however. To make up for this gap, a further investigation was conducted on events in the South China Sea between 2001 and December 2016. The results show a steep increase in MIDs with 25 MIDs taking place over the 15-year period.

Analysis

The “ICOWprov101” dataset is aggregated at the dispute-dyad level, with each dispute-dyad represented by a challenger in a territorial dispute and the target, or current holder of the territory.

Disputes involving multiple actors (such as the Spratly Islands) are listed for each challenger-target dyad. The ICOW dataset starts in the year 1816, but the data used here has been partitioned to only include dispute-dyads that began after January 1, 1900.

Three independent variables are tested in three models, each with its own dependent variable (*MIDs*, *MIDs with fatalities*, and *war*). The three independent variables are *island*, *territorial salience*, and a control variable, *major power*. The following summarizes these variables.

- *War*: the number of wars in each dispute-dyad (requires at least 1,000 combat deaths).
- *MIDs*: the number of militarized interstate disputes for each dyad-dispute. MIDs represent an escalation of the dispute with a new threat, display, or use of military force. An MID can be a single incident or can consist of several similar incidents repeated on a continuous basis without any long breaks. A break of six months discontinues an MID.
- *MIDs with a fatality*: MIDs with at least one battle death (but less than the 1,000 required to count as a war).
- *Island*: indicates whether or not the disputed territory is an island.
- *Territorial salience*: an ICOW-derived additive index ranging from 1 to 12 based on whether any of the following exist: economic

⁴ Bryan Frederick, et al. "The Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims Data, 1816-2001." *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 1 (January 2017): 99-108. The dataset is available at www.paulhensel.org/icowterr.html.

⁵ Glenn Palmer, et al. "The MID4 Data Set: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 32, no. 2 (2015): 222-242.



resources, strategic location, permanent population (at least 100,000), homeland territory, an identity basis for the claim, and historical sovereignty over the claimed territory.

- *Major power*: indicates whether the challenger or target or both are major powers for at least half of the duration of the territorial dispute, as defined by the Correlates of War (COW).⁶

It should be noted that this analysis only covers territorial disputes, not disputes over control of any bodies of water. Island disputes are classified as disputes over islands on the open seas, excluding disputes over river and lake islands (which are coded as continental territorial disputes).

Table 1 presents the variables' means, ranges, and coding. *Island's* mean of .21 shows that 21% of all territorial disputes concern islands. *Territorial salience's* mean shows that most disputed territories tend to be valuable. However, the average salience for disputed islands is 6.6, whereas the average for disputed continental territories is 8.1, meaning that disputed islands are less valuable on average than continental territory. The dependent variables' means show that few dispute-dyads experience MIDs or wars, so the distributions for all three dependent variables are skewed right. The maximum values for the *MIDs*, *MIDs with fatalities* and *War* represent the highest number of incidents these categories experienced across all dispute-dyads.

Table 1. Variable Descriptive Statistics and Definitions

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean (S.D.)</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Definition of Values</i>
MIDs	1.157 (2.81)	0-29	A count of incidents
MIDs w/ fatalities	.605 (1.60)	0-19	A count of incidents
War	.178 (.45)	0-4	A count of incidents
Island	.215 (.41)	0-1	0 = not island; 1 = island
Territorial Salience	7.775 (2.29)	1-12	1 = least valuable; 12 = most valuable
Major power	.548 (.63)	0-2	0 = no major powers; 1 = one major power; 2 = both are major powers

⁶ Correlates of War Project. "State System Membership List, v2016." <http://correlatesofwar.org> (accessed September 26, 2017). The major powers are the UK (1816–), France (1816–1940, 1945–), Austria (1816–1918), Prussia/Germany (1816–

1918, 1925–45, 1991–), Italy (1860–1943), Russia/USSR (1816–1917, 1922–), the U.S. (1898–), Japan (1895–1945, 1991–), and China (1950–).



Table 2 presents the OLS regression of the three dependent variables separately on the independent variables. All three models are statistically significant at the 1% level, with weak but positive Pearson’s *R* correlation scores. Correlation increases as we move from the *MIDs* model, the least level of conflict escalation, to *war*.

Territorial salience has positive, statistically significant coefficients for each model. So the greater a territory’s value, the more likely there will be *MIDs*, *MIDs* with fatalities, and wars. The greater the value of the territory (island or continental) they are disputing, the more likely states are to resort to the use of military force. This of course makes perfect sense; if we did not

Table 2. OLS Regression Results, unstandardized coefficients

Variable	Model 1:	Model 2:	Model 3:
	<i>MIDs</i> (S.E.)	<i>MIDs w/fatalities</i>	<i>War</i>
Island	.252 (.282)	-.337 (.159) **	-.094 (.045) **
Territorial salience	.216 (.052) ***	.107 (.029) ***	.040 (.008) ***
Major power	-.334 (.180) *	-.151 (.102)	.093 (.028) ***
Constant	-.396 (.461)	-.074 (.260)	-.164 (.073)
<i>F</i>	8.302***	9.979***	13.562***
Pearson’s <i>R</i>	.198	.216	.250
<i>N</i>	613	613	613

p*<0.10; *p*<0.05; ****p*<0.01

The coefficient for the principal independent variable, *island*, is positive but it is not statistically significant in the *MIDs* model, meaning we cannot determine that there is a relationship between whether a disputed territory is an island and *MIDs*. The interesting result here is what happens in the next two models, *MIDs with fatalities* and *war*: The coefficients for *island* become negative and statistically significant in each. Thus, while island disputes could experience greater *non-fatal* militarized escalation than non-island disputes (we do not know for sure since *island* is not statistically significant for *MIDs*), we can say that island disputes are less likely to escalate into fatal *MIDs* and wars than non-island territorial disputes.

see these results, then we would have good reason to question the validity of the salience variable or the ICOW dataset itself.

Major power shows a negative, statistically significant relationship with *MIDs*, only to change sign and have a positive relationship with *war* (it is not statistically significant for *MIDs with fatalities*). This means that when major powers are involved in the dispute, non-fatal militarized escalation is less likely, whereas war becomes more likely. This could mean that major powers in general do not engage as much in smaller-scale escalations (*MIDs*), but once they decide on military action, an actual war is more likely to ensue.



Overall, those concerned by the prospect of escalation due to the island disputes in the South China Sea should be relieved by these results. They tell us that island disputes are on average less dangerous than non-island disputes; that is, island disputes are less likely to lead to wars or militarized escalations with fatalities that fall short of actual war than non-island disputes.

On the other hand, the South China Sea island disputes involve a major power, China, which increases the likelihood of war. The South China Sea island disputes in the dataset involve relatively valuable islands: the Spratly and Paracel Islands have salience scores of 8 in the dataset – a little above the mean salience score of all disputed territories. The disputed islands are also all proximate to the involved states, meaning even the weaker states can (and do) involve their smaller militaries.

The South China Sea Since 2001

One major problem with the above analysis is that the ICOW data is updated only up to 2001 and the island disputes in the South China Sea have witnessed a troublesome increase in MIDs since then. For the final analysis, this project updates the data on conflict escalation for the South China Sea between January 2002 and December 2016 using news media sources and the COW 2010 “MID4”.⁷

In total, 25 cases of dispute escalation in the South China Sea – the Spratly Islands, Paracel

Islands, and Scarborough Shoal – have been found.⁸ All 25 incidents are non-fatal MIDs. Thirteen of the incidents (52%) involve government vessels on one side and civilian fishing boats on the other. Nine of these thirteen fishing boat incidents involve Chinese government vessels. Per COW’s rules, incidents involving privately owned vessels on one side, such as fishing boats, must be followed by a protest from the government of the fishing boats to be counted as a MID.⁹

From the ICOW data, there were 32 MIDs, 2 MIDs with fatalities, and no wars associated with the Spratlys and Paracels between 1900 and 2001 (Scarborough Shoal became a disputed territory after 2001). With 25 MIDs in just 15 years, the escalation in the South China Sea is quickly approaching the total for the previous century.

However, the fact that there have been no wars or MIDs with combat fatalities in the South China Sea since 2015 is encouraging, as is the relative decline in incidents thus far in 2017. While the overall trend in MIDs since 2002 is still dangerous, the results of the analysis here tell us that island disputes are still generally less likely to escalate into war than other territorial disputes.

Conclusion

There is reason to be concerned about militarization of the South China Sea. Territorial disputes are after all the most frequent cause of war in history. However, this analysis shows that

⁷ Palmer et al. “The MID4 Data Set.” The “MID_Narratives_2002-2010” pdf is available at <http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/MIDs>.

⁸ The list is available from the author upon request.

⁹ Palmer et al. “The MID4 Data Set.” 236-38.



states are less likely to fight over islands. Recent years have shown an increase in dispute escalation in the South China Sea, but the fact that these incidents include no combat casualties is an encouraging sign. Further research is needed to gain deeper insights into conflict processes in the South China Sea, and studies are currently being

conducted to explore why island disputes might differ from continental disputes with a focus on how distance and naval capabilities affects states' decision-making.

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