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Domestic Turmoil and Diversionary Hypothesis: A Linear Relationship?

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Abstract

Why do individual case studies reveal evidence in favor of diversionary behavior by states, yet quantitative studies often produce many mixed results? In this paper, I help to explain this puzzle by arguing that there is a curvilinear relationship between internal conflict and external diversionary behavior as opposed to a linear one. By looking at contentious issues mainly in the Western Hemisphere from 1962 to 2001 using data from the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project, I find that countries with moderate levels of domestic unrest are most likely to initiate a militarized interstate conflict. Furthermore, I find that in times of elite unrest, states are more likely to have diversionary behaviors. In contrast, mass unrest is unlikely to incentivize states to use foreign policy adventures to rally domestic support. Such a finding helps deepen our understanding of the complex conditions leading to diversionary actions.

Keywords

Domestic turmoil, Diversionary hypothesis, Curvilinear, Dispute initiation

Introduction

What is the relationship between domestic conflict and international conflict? How does domestic unrest affect international instability? Faced with domestic turmoil, leaders may provoke international conflict to boost their domestic position, what is known as diversionary conflict, but they may also use more cooperative foreign policy tools to address limited resources in dealing with domestic troubles. During an economic crisis, Argentine had a conflict with Britain over the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982, partially to divert the public's attention to domestic troubles (Levy & Vakili, 1992). In contrast, case studies on China's compromises in territorial disputes since 1949 suggest that regime insecurity made China more cooperative in dealing with neighboring nations, leading scholars to claim a "diversionary peace" thesis (Fravel, 2005). Indeed, for generations, scholars have had great curiosity about the relationship between domestic unrest and international

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conflict. Haas et al. (1956) contend that the elites fearful of losing domestic positions during rapid industrialization and social changes may try to divert the attention of the disaffected population by conflictual foreign policy. From the standpoint of citizens, Wright (1942, p. 1016) holds that a fear of invasion by foreign nations and a hope of domination over others among communities may guarantee obedience to a ruler. However, quantitative analysis of the diversionary thesis has produced mixed results (Fordham, 2017). On the one hand, it is tempting for leaders to divert the restive public's attention from domestic troubles such as a high unemployment rate by initiating an international conflict; on the other hand, it may seem irrational for leaders to have an additional international crisis while they already have so many troubles within. Faced with domestic unrest, nations should not seek more troubles abroad. How should we deal with this puzzle?

Existing empirical research mostly focuses on the study of diversionary behaviors of great powers such as the United States (e.g., James & Oneal, 1991) or Great Britain (e.g., Morgan & Anderson, 1999). For major powers, we have robust evidence that the use of force is more likely when inflation and unemployment increase (Foster, 2006). However, we are more likely to encounter mixed results if we include countries with different power statuses in the analysis. Instead of taking sides with either view, this paper tries to reconcile these seemingly opposite arguments by arguing that there is a curvilinear (an inverted U shape) relationship between domestic turmoil and the initiation of international conflict by states. When the level of domestic turmoil is low, there may be no need to divert the public's attention by initiating international conflict. Leaders may accommodate or oppress the demands of the public (Davies, 2016). When the level of domestic turmoil is high, it is also unlikely for leaders to take diversionary actions as new disputes can well increase the already high level of dissatisfaction with the government by the public. It is the moderate level of domestic unrest that is most likely to cause diversionary behaviors, when troubled leaders can expect to boost support for themselves by initiating international disputes. In various levels of domestic turmoil, leaders trying to stay in power or maximize their domestic support will face different results in taking diversionary actions, thus affecting their likelihood of doing so. Failure to recognize this often leads to contradictory findings. Indeed, treating the relationship between domestic turmoil and diversionary behavior as linear is one of the reasons why conventional quantitative research often provides mixed results. In this study, I argue that low and high levels of domestic turmoil are less likely to cause diversionary behaviors, while a medium level of domestic unrest is associated with more diversionary actions. I explore both theoretically and empirically how this relationship contributes to our understanding of the diversionary hypothesis.

My theory adopts an issue approach. I look at how nations behave in contentious issues when facing different levels of domestic unrest. This paper first explores the existing literature on mechanisms of diversionary hypothesis and opportunities for diversionary behaviors. It then explores theoretically why different levels of domestic turmoil may lead to different states' behaviors in the presence of opportunities in the form of ongoing contentious issues. This provides a basis for explaining why a curvilinear relationship is possible.

I analyze contentious territorial, maritime, and river issues as coded by the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project from 1962 to 2001. I also combine the ICOW data with the domestic unrest data from the Cross-National Time-Series Data (CNTS) in logistic regression analysis. The main model testing the curvilinear relationship is compared with the linear model. This paper also tests three different levels of domestic turmoil (low, medium, and high unrest). I find evidence of a curvilinear relationship between domestic turmoil and militarized dispute (MID) initiation across multiple turmoil indicators, supporting my theoretical argument that moderate forms of turmoil are most likely to produce diversionary conflict.

The Diversionary Hypothesis

International relations scholars are fascinated by the linkage between domestic violence and international conflict behavior. Intuitively, wars with foreign nations may unify people within a nation and boost the support for leaders. Leaders have a strong desire to stay in power, thus it is possible for them to initiate conflict with other nations to divert public attention at a time of domestic unrest, otherwise known as the diversionary hypothesis. Numerous modern international theorists have endorsed this diversionary hypothesis (Levy, 1989), yet we often see mixed results in empirical tests. On the one hand, scholars argue that we may claim every war since 1800 could be traced back somehow to efforts to deal with domestic problems (Morgan & Bickers, 1992) and that countries are more likely to use force when inflation or unemployment are high, especially in opportunity-rich international environments (e.g., rivalry) (DeRouen, 1995; Fordham, 1998, 2002; Mitchell & Prins 2004; Mitchell & Thyne, 2010; Morgan & Anderson, 1999; Morgan & Bickers, 1992; Ostrom & Job, 1986).

On the other hand, some scholars find a weak or null effect of domestic unrest on the likelihood of initiating international conflict (Meernik, 2018; Miller & Elgün, 2011; Rummel, 1963; Zinnes & Wilkenfeld, 1971). Chiozza and Goemans (2003) found that leaders become less likely to initiate international conflict as their probability of losing office increases. Employing data on domestic and foreign conflict for 75 countries from 1954 to 1966, Hazelwood (1975) also finds mixed results for different years. Even in the case of the United States, perhaps the most thoroughly examined case in the study of the diversionary hypothesis, there are inconsistent results. Russett (1990) finds that during economic downturns, there is a significant increase in the United States' use of force (see also Hess & Orphanides, 1995; Morgan & Bickers, 1992). Yet Meernik and Waterman (1996) are very critical of the results showing diversionary behavior by American presidents, claiming that in the United States, the linkage between domestic politics and international use of force is almost non-existent.

These contrasting results stem from theoretical and research design differences. For instance, in studying the diversionary use of force by American presidents, Meernik and Waterman (1996) argue that the president does not necessarily receive substantive gains from the public when diversionary force is used and the president is also restrained by the international environment even if there exist diversionary incentives. As a result, using opportunities to initiate diversionary conflict as the dependent variable, they failed to find a relationship between domestic conditions and the president's use of force from 1953 to 1988. Morgan and Bickers (1992) agree that internal cohesion may even further decrease after a conflict with a foreign country, but they argue that political leaders have the diversionary incentive only when the loss of support is from the government's ruling coalition. Based on this argument, they use militarized dispute initiation by the American president as the dependent variable and support for the president among his partisans as the main independent variable, covering a period from 1953 to 1976. The test results support their reformulated diversionary hypothesis.

As explored by Mitchell and Prins (2004), such inconsistent results may come from differences in regime types (Enterline & Gleditsch, 2000), the military's influence on leaders' choice of using force abroad (Dassel & Reinhardt, 1999), or the potential target's strategic avoidance of taking controversial policies at a time when diversionary actions are mostly needed by the potential challenger (Leeds & Davis 1997; Smith, 1996). Even in democracies, different democratic political systems have different diversionary tendencies (Kisangani & Pickering, 2011). Furthermore, inconsistent results may arise from the unit of analysis issues, like focusing on states instead of leaders or ignoring a reciprocal relationship between losing office and international conflict (Chiozza & Goemans, 2004). It may also arise from failure to consider opportunities and multiple

pathways of diversionary behavior. As noted by Fordham (2017), not all forms of domestic trouble are likely to create diversionary incentives, and those that do may not work in the same way. The use of force is not the only way of taking diversionary actions. Not all states have equal opportunities to take diversionary actions, whether in terms of domestic opportunities or international opportunities (Butcher, 2021). Notably, Mitchell and Prins (2004) find that in the context of rivalry, there are rich opportunities for taking diversionary actions, while in non-rivalry environments, with the increase of domestic turmoil, states are less likely to take such actions (see also Mitchell & Thyne, 2010).

The multiple pathways from domestic difficulty to international conflict include four main mechanisms, as summarized by Fordham (2017). The most commonly discussed is the in-group/outgroup dynamic. When their state has a conflict with another state, the public will come to the support of their leaders and set aside misgivings about the government. This tendency is sometimes called the "rally-round-the-flag" effect (Mueller, 1973). Leaders aware of this may choose to engage in conflict with another state to take advantage of this effect to boost support for themselves. Furthermore, even without the rally effect, leaders can still benefit from taking diversionary actions: they can set the agenda on issues in which they are well regarded (DeRouen & Peake, 2002), especially for leaders who are more popular in foreign affairs. The third mechanism can be called a "gamble for resurrection." Downs and Rocke (1994) developed this concept from formal models, where leaders try to show their competence through foreign policy success. Troubled by huge economic difficulties, leaders may have a sense of military bias to launch a conflict with a foreign nation even when the probability of winning is low. Military success is needed for this strategy to succeed. The fourth mechanism is scapegoating, where another country is blamed for the domestic difficulties of one's own country. Such a rhetorical strategy requires a potential enemy that can plausibly be responsible for the troubles a country is experiencing. This strategy does not necessarily need military conflict.

The opportunities for diversionary actions vary across contexts. Politically relevant states, defined as pairs of states sharing borders or containing one or more major powers, have a high opportunity for conflict (Maoz & Russett, 1992). Strategic interests can also affect states' opportunity for diversionary behavior, as noted above, especially in rivalry environments (Vasquez, 1993). Perceived threats, severity of crisis, and high political issues can all affect such opportunities. Furthermore, diversionary scholars contribute to the study of opportunities for conflict by exploring domestic factors, such as economic crisis and political unrest. Among the domestic institutions, scholars still debate whether democracies are more likely to take diversionary actions or not. For instance, Miller (1999) and Mitchell and Prins (2004) find that democracies tend to use diversionary force less than authoritarian governments, yet Davies (2002) shows that democracies are more likely to do so. Based on such findings, this study includes joint democracy (both countries in a dyad are democracies) as control variables.

A Potential Curvilinear Relationship

The existing literature on the diversionary hypothesis explores conditions where diversionary behaviors are likely to happen in an environment with various opportunities, as explored in the previous section. However, such investigations tend to assume a linear relationship between domestic turmoil and international conflict. My research takes a different approach. I argue that there is a curvilinear, instead of linear, relationship between domestic turmoil and international conflict. This section explores why there is such a possibility.

My approach differs from that of the existing literature by emphasizing that different levels

of domestic unrest have different effects on leaders' decision-making process concerning diversionary actions. Diversionary actions relying on violence against foreign nations are more likely only in moderate levels of domestic unrest, and low and high levels of domestic unrest may be associated with more peaceful foreign relations, at least not more conflictual international behaviors. This is because the mechanisms leading to diversionary behaviors do not work the same in different levels of domestic turmoil.

To initiate a conflict, state leaders need both opportunity and willingness (Most & Starr, 1980). Following the issue approach (Hensel et al., 2008), I focus on factors that increase the use of military force to resolve ongoing diplomatic conflicts over territorial, maritime, or river issues. In contentious issues, such as China and Japan's ongoing diplomatic claim over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, leaders have opportunities to initiate disputes on claimed issues against another country, but their willingness to do so is not obvious.

I make two assumptions in exploring the diversionary hypothesis. First, the primary goal of leaders is to stay in power and boost their power status within (de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995). Second, wars are costly (Fearon, 1995) and the result of war is full of uncertainty (Bas & Schub, 2016). When dealing with contentious issues, leaders must be cautious in initiating a conflict purely for the sake of diverting the public's attention. The result of the war against foreign nations, is full of uncertainty, even if there are huge power gaps between the two states. If China used military force to pursue its claims against Japan, for example, it might risk conflict with Japan's allies, especially the United States. As a result, leaders are not expected to take diversionary behavior every time there is domestic unrest.

When the level of domestic turmoil is low, the leaders holding onto power are usually not threatened. In such a situation, most leaders tend to have other options to deal with domestic problems. Faced with domestic dissidents, leaders can directly solve the problem such as tightening repression or making concessions (Davies, 2016). In foreign policy, they may also have several choices, which is called foreign policy substitutability (Clark et al., 2008). China could pursue additional oil exploration, which might create tensions in the diplomatic conflict with Japan, but such a move would not produce a military escalation of the situation. In times of low domestic turmoil, leaders are less likely to choose conflictual and costly foreign policy tools such as war from the viewpoint of constraints that they may face. Leaders may face institutional restrictions or be hemmed in by international circumstances (Fordham, 2017). In such a context, leaders may not bring themselves additional trouble (initiating foreign conflicts) while they already have one (domestic unrest). Even if they take diversionary actions, they may take the agenda setting strategy or scapegoating strategy instead of initiating conflicts directly.

With the increase of domestic turmoil, leaders should feel more constrained in terms of resources available for them to deal with domestic problems, but such unrest is never intense enough to threaten their hold on power. It is in such a moderate level of domestic turmoil that they most need a "rally-round-the-flag" effect or to demonstrate foreign policy competence to boost their domestic support. At a time when public dissatisfaction increases to a certain extent, scapegoating may not be enough to divert the public's attention. Leaders may take military actions where the military goal is not the reason why armed force is used. Instead, such actions can be seen as a "political use of major force" (Ostrom & Job, 1986). In this stage, conventional and low-risk measures may fail to help form a winning coalition, which is the minimum subset of the selectorate to support leaders to stay in power, so riskier strategies, such as militarized dispute initiation, may be adopted by leaders to gain sufficient political support (Enterline & Gleditsch, 2000). In contentious issues, leaders may well hope to show to the public that they have the competence and resolve to defend the national interests. As contentious issues can easily be linked to a state's identity, they also expect to receive the "rally-round-the-flag" by initiating

an international conflict. Under conditions of moderate domestic turmoil, diversionary actions are most likely to happen. For instance, as the risk of a coup event increases, countries are more likely to get involved in disputes (Miller & Elgün, 2011). Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez survived a coup attempt in 2002, and he adopted bellicose posturing internationally to decrease the coup risk, such as repeated announcements of a potential American attack against Venezuela. He also maintained an assertive attitude in international relations, such as readiness for military involvement against Colombia (Miller & Elgün, 2011).

But when domestic turmoil reaches a very high level to the extent of threatening the holding of office by leaders, the likelihood of taking diversionary behaviors tends to decrease. At a time when lots of efforts have already been taken to reduce domestic turmoil, yet domestic unrest still increases, the remaining resources for leaders to deal with such dissatisfaction likely become more limited, and it is harder to support foreign adventures. Military resources, such as military personnel or materials, need to be kept within one's state to deal with potential revolutions or riots. The public may not express any support for the leaders when domestic unrest is very high, even when there is conflict with a foreign country. That is, none of the four main mechanisms for diversionary behaviors to achieve the expected effect for leaders will work. As written by Simmel, war may cause domestic quarrels to be forgotten or aggravate them beyond reconciliation (Levy, 1989). At a high level of domestic unrest, initiating external conflict may not receive domestic support, and there are possibilities that external conflict brings more domestic conflict, as external enemies could actively support insurgencies within the country. A conflict concerning contentious issues may not be seen as a strength but ineptitude in dealing with foreign affairs by the public. Faced with deteriorating domestic conditions, the leaders will have motivated bias where they tend to overestimate their own capability and underestimate that of the potential enemy. But this does not necessarily mean that they are irrational to the extent of initiating a conflict where all odds are against them, as the work on gambling for resurrection suggests. Although some German leaders in 1914 thought war could unite the country, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg was afraid of the unpredicted consequences of world war, which might undermine the existing political order (Mommsen, 1973). Under such conditions, political leaders prefer to postpone war until domestic conditions become better for achieving diversionary purposes (Levy, 1989).

The possibility of a curvilinear relationship between domestic turmoil and diversionary behaviors is not new. As Coser (1956, p. 93) notes:

The relationship between outer conflict and inner cohesion does not hold true where internal cohesion before the outbreak of the conflict is so low that the group members have to regard preservation of the group as worthwhile, or actually see the outside threat to concern "them" rather than "us." In such cases, the disintegration of the group, rather than an increase in cohesion, will be the result of outside conflict.

As written by Simmel, who first proposed the in-group/out-group cohesion mechanism that leads to successful diversion, war is the last chance for a state to overcome domestic troubles, and it may cause domestic quarrels to be forgotten or aggravate them beyond reconciliation (Levy, 1989). That is, international conflict may increase the level of domestic conflict (Tilly & Ardant, 1975).

Faced with outside conflict, social systems lacking social solidarity are likely to disintegrate (Coser, 1956, p. 95). Mayer (1969, pp. 295-296) also argues that political leaders generally refrain from or postpone war when domestic tensions are so acute that even the loyalty of the military cannot be relied upon. Such arguments lead Levy (1989) to discuss the possibility of a nonlinear relationship: diversionary behavior being most likely at moderate levels of domestic conflict and less likely at both very low and very high levels of internal conflict.

However, such insights seem to be ignored by most empirical literature on the diversionary

hypothesis, which usually assumes a linear relationship.[1] Furthermore, such ideas were developed theoretically, but have not been thoroughly examined with empirical evidence. As a result, my study contributes to the empirical study and theoretical development of this hypothesis.

>   Hypothesis 1. With the increase of domestic turmoil, diversionary behavior is more likely; but when the level of domestic unrest is too high, the likelihood of diversionary actions decreases.
>   Hypothesis 2. Moderate level domestic unrest will make it more likely for leaders to initiate violent diversionary behaviors compared with low and high levels of domestic unrest.

For the nonlinear relationship, I use the total number of these eight domestic turmoil indices as the main independent variable to test hypothesis 1. Then, I explore how three different levels of domestic turmoil (low, medium, and high) affect diversionary behavior to test hypothesis 2. The hypotheses here are about initiating disputes to divert the domestic public's attention away from domestic troubles. Initiating an international conflict is merely one of the relatively violent ways of diversion. Other forms of diversionary behavior short of initiating disputes, such as conflictual diplomatic rhetoric against another state, may be found in the lower level of domestic turmoil, which are not explored in this paper.

I test my hypothesis while also controlling for states' opportunities to take diversionary actions. I take an issue-based approach by exploring how contentious issues are treated by states in times of domestic turmoil. Contentious issues provide opportunities for diversionary behavior. As noted by Mitchell and Thyne (2010), by focusing on diplomatic disagreements over territorial, maritime, and river issues (or issue claims), we further narrow down the dyads that have the opportunity to have conflict. For contentious issues, the opportunities to initiate conflict are always there. By investigating such issues, we can exclude states where there are fewer interactions/opportunities to have conflict.

An issue is "a disputed point or question, the subject of a conflict or controversy" (Randle & Rapp, 1987, p. 1). This approach assumes that leaders care about achieving their goals over specific issues instead of simply pursuing "high politics" of power or security (Hensel et al., 2008). Based on the nature of the issues, states' behaviors will vary greatly (Mansbach & Vasquez, 1981).

Leaders cannot divert the public's attention at will when there is no opportunity to do so. When contentious issues are ongoing, the opportunity is rich for diversionary behavior, so it depends more on the leader's willingness to take conflict actions against another state or not. When China reiterated its historical territorial and maritime claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (and Taiwan) in 1970, this created opportunities for both China and Japan to use militarized force over the contested issue.[2]

As explored earlier, the focus on contentious issues helps us explore the initiation of MIDs in the context of opportunities. One advantage of the issue approach is that it allows us to explore how the overall importance (as measured by "salience") of an issue affects a country's behaviors. Issue salience captures both tangible factors such as the presence of oil or fish and intangible factors such as historic homeland claims or sacred sites (Hensel et al., 2008). As the purpose of diversionary conflict is to divert the public's attention, we can assume that diversionary behaviors are more likely to happen in more salient issues, a pattern observed by Mitchell and Thyne (2010). Based on this, my study includes issue salience to test the curvilinear relationship. In brief, as contentious issues provide opportunities for diverting the public's attention and vary in salience, they are particularly useful for testing the diversionary hypothesis.

When I attempt to divide domestic turmoil into low, moderate and high levels, it is not easy to draw a clear line concerning which kind of turmoil belongs to which category. As a result, I use mass unrest as an indicator of low levels of domestic turmoil and elite unrest as a measure of moderate levels of domestic turmoil. According to the existing literature, general strikes, riots and anti-government demonstrations are treated as mass-level unrest, while government crises and purges are seen as elite-level domestic unrest (Mitchell et al., 1989; Pickering & Kisangani, 2005). According to the logic of my theory, elite unrest is more likely to cause diversionary behaviors than mass unrest, as elite unrest may put greater challenges to the leaders, thus being more threatening to the holding of power by leaders. Besides mass-level and elite-level unrest, I also consider guerrilla wars and revolutions as indicators for high levels of domestic unrest. For the guerrilla war and revolution, it is hard to distinguish mass unrest from elite unrest, as in such situations, both the masses and elites are likely to be dissatisfied with the government. As noted in my theory, in a high level of such domestic turmoil, we are less likely to witness diversionary behaviors than when leaders face moderate levels of domestic unrest.

Research Design

This study takes an issue-based approach to test the hypotheses proposed. I utilize data from Mitchell and Thyne (2010) on contentious issues including territory, maritime and cross-border river competitive diplomatic claims from 1962 to 2001.[3] The contentious issues are identified if there is explicit evidence of contention involving official representatives of two or more countries over an issue, such as Chinese government officials stating the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and Taiwan are China's sacred territory and foreign exploitation will not be tolerated in December 1970 (Dzurek, 1996). Such issue claims are coded by the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) (Hensel et al., 2008). In the original data set, there are 10,041 observations that capture a total of 244 issue claim dyad-years (Hensel et al., 2008).[4] Each year that the Senkaku/Diaoyu diplomatic conflict is ongoing, for example, would add an observation to the claim dyad-year dataset. Following the example of Mitchell and Thyne (2010), I use directed dyad-year as the unit of analysis, so the original data has 20,082 observations. This would treat China as state A (or a potential MID initiator) in one claim dyad-year and Japan as state A in the same claim dyad-year. The data covers territorial claims in the Western Hemisphere and Western Europe (1816 to 2001), maritime claims in the Western Hemisphere and Europe (1900 to 2001), and river claims in the Western Hemisphere, Western Europe, and the Middle East (1900 to 2001). However, the Mitchell and Thyne (2010) version of the dataset covers only the years 1962 to 2001 due to temporal coverage for inflation data, which leaves a total of 5780 directed dyad-year observations. I take variables from the Cross-National Time-Series Data, as detailed below, to measure domestic turmoil.

The dependent variable is a binary variable of whether a state initiates a militarized interstate dispute (MID) in each claim-dyad-year. The MID data are coded by the Correlates of War (COW) Project. A MID is defined as "united historical cases in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state" (Jones et al., 1996, p. 168). The ICOW project matches MIDs to issue claims if the militarized dispute is related to the ongoing issue at stake. A MID is code 1 if State A initiated a dispute against State B in a claim-dyad-year and 0 otherwise. There are 343 cases of MID initiation, accounting for 5.93 of the total directed dyad cases.

In this research, the term "domestic turmoil" is used to capture how citizens of a country are visibly dissatisfied with the government, which can be seen as an indicator of the leader's (un)

popularity (Tir, 2010). The main independent variable used by Mitchell and Thyne (2010) is the level of domestic turmoil, which is measured by the percentage change of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) from the World Bank. Although CPI is a reliable measurement of domestic unrest and is used by many scholars, it does not give us specific types of domestic unrest. To capture this, I use the domestic turmoil indices from the Cross-National Time-Series Data (CNTS) (Banks & Wilson, 2023). For each variable, the CNTS records the total number of events for each country-year (e.g., total number of riots per year).

Low levels of domestic turmoil are measured using the CNTS variables for demonstrations, general strikes, and riots. According to Banks and Wilson (2023, p. 5), a demonstration is "any peaceful public gathering of at least 100 people for the primary purpose of displaying or voicing their opposition to government policies or authority," but anti-foreign activities are not included. General strikes are strikes that involve more than one employer and aim at national government policies or authority, which involve at least 1000 industrial or service workers. Riots involve more than 100 citizens with the use of physical force by such dissatisfying citizens. Such domestic unrest does not directly typically threaten the stability of government or the holding on power of state leaders, so I consider these as indicators of low-level unrest.

A moderate level of domestic turmoil is measured as the number of purges and government crises. Purges are "systematic elimination by jailing or execution of political opposition within the ranks of the regime or the opposition" (Banks & Wilson, 2023, p. 5). A government crisis is a situation that threatens to bring the downfall of the present regime, but it does not include revolt aimed at overthrowing the government. Such moderate domestic turmoil situations have the potential to affect the tenure of the leaders, creating diversionary incentives for an adventurous foreign policy such as initiating disputes on contentious issues.

For a high level of domestic turmoil, I use the number of terrorist attacks and the occurrence of guerrilla warfare, assassinations, and revolutions as indicators. The terrorism/guerrilla war is defined as "Any armed activity, sabotage, or bombings carried on by independent bands of citizens or irregular forces and aimed at the overthrow of the present regime" (Banks & Wilson, 2023, p. 5). A country is also considered to have a terrorism/guerrilla war if we observe sporadic bombing, sabotage, or terrorism. When terrorism or guerrilla war happens, it indicates the government loses the monopoly over control of territory or the exclusive use of force. Assassination is "Any politically motivated murder or attempted murder of a high government official or politician" while revolution is defined as "Any illegal or forced change in the top government elite, any attempt at such a change, or any successful or unsuccessful armed rebellion whose aim is independence from the central government" (Banks & Wilson, 2023, p. 5). Under such conditions, the government is facing severe conditions. Both indicators are added together to capture a high level of domestic turmoil.[5]

I also include several control variables. The "issue salience" covers a variety of issue features to decide the importance of an issue to both the initiators and the target, ranging from 0 to 12, with a higher number representing a higher level of issue salience (see Hensel et al. (2008) for more details about such attributes). The variable "relative power" is a ratio of the initiator's COW capabilities (CINC) to the combined CINC score of the dyad. "Joint democracy" is a binary variable coded as 1 if both states in the dyad have a score greater than 5 in the combined regime type score in Polity IV. Distance captures the logged miles of distance between the capital cities in a dyad. The number of peace years since the last time the dyad fought a MID, and the cubic splines for such variables, are also included.

Since the dependent variable is binary, logistic regression is adopted. In line with the traditional treatment, all the independent variables are lagged for one year to explore their effects on the initiation of MIDs. The standard errors are clustered by claims to deal with the issue of

interdependence.

In the next section, I first test the nonlinear relationship by relying on the total number of these eight domestic turmoil indices as the main independent variable to test hypothesis 1. Then I explore how three different levels of domestic turmoil (low, medium, and high) affect diversionary behavior to test hypothesis 2. I first compare the linear relationship and the curvilinear relationship to see which one can better help us capture the association between domestic turmoil and assertive international behavior. This paper further explores the effects of different types of domestic turmoil on MIDs initiation. In the mass unrest model, the number of low-level domestic turmoil events is obtained by adding up the counts of demonstrations, strikes, and riots in a given year. The elite unrest model uses the moderate level of domestic turmoil as the main independent variable, which is measured as the total number of purges and government crises per year. The total number of terrorism and guerrilla wars, assassinations, and revolutions each year is treated as the index of high level of domestic turmoil.

Result and Discussion

The results of the statistical analysis are presented in Table 1.[6] In these two models, the main independent variable is the total number of all eight types of domestic turmoil per year. In the linear model (Model 1), there is no statistical significance for the main independent variable "turmoil". It shows that if we assume there is a linear relationship between domestic turmoil

Table 1. Logistic Analysis of MID Initiation: 1962-2001

	(1) Linear model	(2) Curvilinear model
Total turmoil	0.0027 (0.0050)	0.0242* (0.0147)
Total turmoil squared		-0.0003* (0.0002)
Issue salience	0.0307 (0.0330)	0.0312 (0.0328)
Rivalry	0.1632 (0.2546)	0.1395 (0.2597)
Relative power	-0.0837 (0.1539)	-0.0708 (0.1541)
Joint democracy	-0.4147*** (0.1141)	-0.4077*** (0.1120)
Distance	-0.1220* (0.0666)	-0.1243* (0.0650)
Peace years	-0.1773*** (0.0379)	-0.1783*** (0.0382)
Constant	-1.6787*** (0.2637)	-1.7467*** (0.2579)
Observations	5766	5766
LL	-1156.4	-1154.8
χ^2	212.92***	211.97***

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$ (one-tailed).

Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by issue/dyad. Peace years splines not shown.
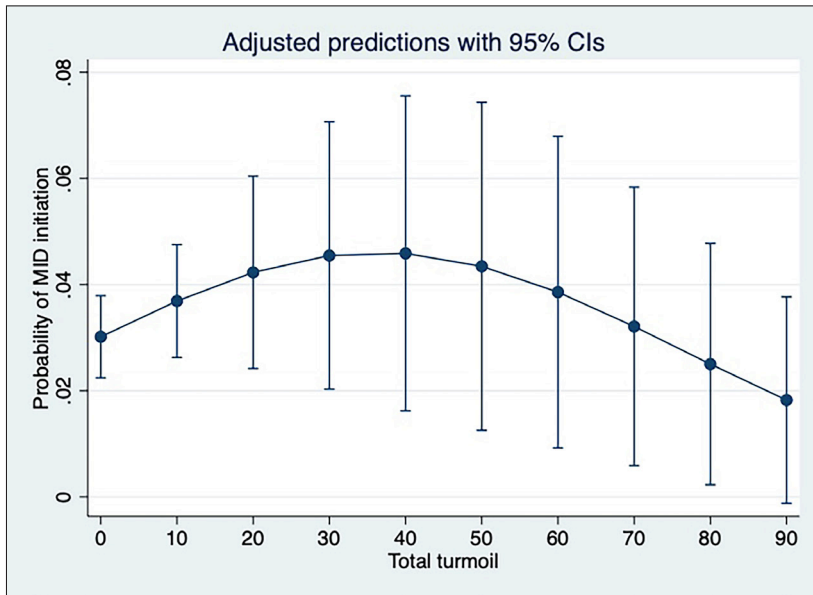
Figure 1. The substantive effect of total domestic turmoil on MID initiation

and initiation of a MID over contentious issues, we fail to find statistical significance and get the conclusion that in contentious issues, the diversionary hypothesis fails to be supported. However, if we test a nonlinear relationship by squaring the total number of domestic turmoil events in a given year, as shown in the curvilinear model (Model 2), we find significant results. In this model, the number of domestic turmoil events is squared. Its negative coefficient shows that with the increase of the level of domestic turmoil, countries are more likely to initiate a MID; but as the level of domestic turmoil increases to a certain extent, nations then become less likely to have a diversionary MID over contentious issues. To see the conditional effect of interactions, we need a graphical representation rather than looking merely at the coefficients, as the marginal effect of domestic turmoil cannot be inferred from the coefficients on the key variables of interest.

The substantive effects are shown in Figure 1, which captures the conditional effect of the main independent "total turmoil" on MID initiation while holding other variables at their means. Figure 1 shows that with the increase of in the total number of domestic turmoil, firstly the likelihood of MID increases, but as the number of turmoil increases beyond roughly 40, the increase of the number of turmoil actually has the effect of reducing the likelihood of MID initiation. When the number of domestic turmoil events is less than 30 (moving from low to medium turmoil), we see evidence supporting the traditional view that there is diversionary behavior by states, but it happens when domestic turmoil is at a low level. But with the increase of domestic turmoil, states are less likely to have MIDs. Indeed, when the number of domestic turmoil events is 80, states are s less likely to witness MID initiation than the situation where there is no domestic turmoil. If we merely assume a linear relationship, we would fail to see evidence for the diversionary hypothesis. Furthermore, we explore the change of the probability of MID initiation. Figure 1 shows that the probability of initiating a MID increases by roughly 50% when the number of domestic turmoil events increases from 0 to 30; but it decreases by 80% when the number of domestic turmoil increases from 30 to 80. This provides support to hypothesis 1, and it shows a clear curvilinear relationship between domestic turmoil and diversionary behavior.

The total number of domestic turmoil events variable treats different kinds of unrest as similar in creating the overall index, but different types of domestic turmoil events may have different effects on MID initiation. To further explore the curvilinear relationship between domestic turmoil and diversionary behavior, I also test the mass unrest, elite unrest, and guerrilla war/revolution models in Table 2. We see that the mass unrest, representing a low level of domestic turmoil, as well as the guerrilla war/revolution model, representing a high level of domestic turmoil, are not statistically significant at the traditional significance level, consistent with my theory. Only the elite model which represents a moderate level of domestic unrest is statistically significant with a positive coefficient.[7] This shows in elite unrest we are more likely to observe diversionary behaviors or that more elite unrest is associated with a greater likelihood of MID initiation.

Figure 2 shows the substantive effect of elite unrest on the probability of MID initiation. As in the curvilinear model, we explore the change in the probability of MID initiation. As the number of elite-level domestic turmoil increases, we see an increase in the likelihood of MID initiation by states. In specific, the probability of MID initiation increases by 40% when the number of elite unrest events increases from 0 to 7.

Table 2 shows when there is elite unrest, it is likely for states to initiate a MID over contentious issues; but when there is mass-level unrest (low-level turmoil) or revolutions, assassinations, and guerrilla war (high-level turmoil), we do not find statistical evidence that states tend to adopt

Table 2. Logistic Analysis of MID Initiation: 1962-2001 by Turmoil Levels

	(1) Mass model	(2) Elite model	(3) War/revolution model
Mass turmoil	0.0030 (0.0052)		
Elite turmoil		0.1192* (0.0722)	
Guerrilla war/revolution			-0.0150 (0.0262)
Issue salience	0.0308 (0.0329)	0.0301 (0.0318)	0.0304 (0.0329)
Rivalry	0.1643 (0.2549)	0.1615 (0.2600)	0.1760 (0.2569)
Relative power	-0.0841 (0.1543)	-0.0731 (0.1531)	-0.0896 (0.1537)
Joint democracy	-0.4158*** (0.1147)	-0.3968*** (0.1178)	-0.4224*** (0.1150)
Distance	-0.1225* (0.0658)	-0.1120 (0.0690)	-0.1190* (0.0689)
Peace years	-0.1772*** (0.0378)	-0.1777*** (0.0379)	-0.1767*** (0.0379)
Constant	-1.6756*** (0.2629)	-1.7267*** (0.2610)	-1.6473*** (0.2687)
Observations	5766	5766	5766
LL	-1156.4	-1154.9	-1156.3
χ^2	206.83***	210.26***	224.67***

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$ (one-tailed).
Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by issue/dyad. Peace years splines not shown.
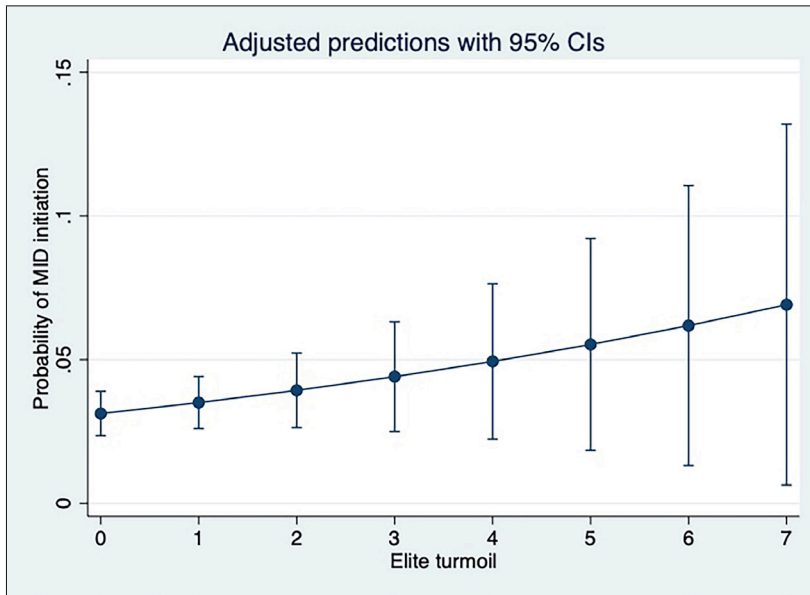
Figure 2. The substantive effect of elite domestic turmoil on MIDs initiation

diversionary actions as measured by MIDs. Such findings are consistent with my theoretical expectations. In low level domestic turmoil such as mass unrest, states tend to take other forms of diversionary behavior without initiating a MID, such as scapegoating. Perhaps states just want to rely on military resources to quell domestic mass unrest rather than send soldiers abroad. For a moderate level of domestic unrest such as elite unrest, states are in need of a "rally-around-the-flag" effect to unite the elites and the masses to foster within group unity. Initiating an MID may increase the support of the masses toward the government, making elites less likely to go against current leaders. However, when the domestic turmoil level is high, such as when there are attempts of revolutions and assassinations against high government officials, states will again become cautious of adding more troubles to themselves by initiating conflict against other states. Overall, hypothesis 2 is supported.

Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 are closely related to each other. The result of Hypothesis 1 shows the overall trend that a moderate level of domestic unrest is more likely to incentivize state leaders to initiate a diversionary conflict. Hypothesis 2 further breaks down the index used in Hypothesis 1 into several concrete categories, where a moderate level of domestic unrest is measured as government purges and crises, which sometimes is referred to as elite unrest in the existing literature (e.g., Mitchell et al., 1989; Pickering & Kisangani, 2005).[8] Yet a moderate level of domestic unrest is not necessarily limited to government purges and crises, and such forms of unrest may be closely related to other forms of unrest: government crisis may lead the elites adversely affected in a state to incentivize the public's dissatisfaction toward the government, thus increasing public strikes or demonstrations.

I assess the robustness of my empirical results in several ways, as shown in the appendix. First, as the dependent variable MID initiation is a rare event, I use statistical methods developed for rare events (the Relogit developed by King and Zeng (2001) and the Firth logit model) to test the hypotheses. The results are shown in Table A1 and Table A2, which are consistent with the findings above. Second, I also use the consumer price index (CPI, logged and differenced)

as the main independent variable in place of the total number of domestic turmoil events to test the curvilinear relationship between domestic unrest and diversionary behavior. Mitchell and Thyne (2010) find that diversionary behavior for contentious issues is stronger for issues with higher salience scores. In Table A3, I confirm this result, with the curvilinear pattern for domestic turmoil and diversionary conflict being strongest in the high (> 6) and very high (> 9) salience dyads. In Figure A4, I graphed the substantive effect for the "very high salience model." As expected, for very salient issues, we are more likely to observe a curvilinear relationship if we compare it with Figure 1.

The findings of my study contribute to our understanding of the diversionary hypothesis in several ways. First, as shown in Table 1, the curvilinear relationship between domestic turmoil and initiation of MIDs over contentious issues can reveal findings that are not discovered in diversionary hypothesis tests that assume a linear relationship. In this way, this paper helps explain why sometimes scholars find no relationship between domestic turmoil and diversionary MID initiation. Second, the curvilinear relationship may predict the MID initiation better than a linear relationship even if we find the linear relationship is statistically significant. To test this possibility, in the future, we may need to compare the model fit by creating both linear and curvilinear models relying on the same data. Third, contrary to the view that when believing their political authority is tenuous, leaders tend to take external war for the sake of domestic crisis management (Mayer, 1969), my findings indicate states do not become more likely to take diversionary MID under such a condition. Yet, this does not mean other types of diversionary actions, such as rhetoric diversion, will not be employed. Cheap talk short of militarization of contentious issues may increase to divert the public's attention. Future research may dig this aspect deeper with cheap talk as the dependent variable.

This paper treats territorial, maritime, and river claims together as contentious issues. Some studies show that territorial disputes may be especially suitable for diversionary behavior and find statistical significance (e.g., Tir, 2010). Separating territorial issues from other issues may give us the same result as this paper. But given the tangible and intangible values of the territory, for territorial issues even in high domestic turmoil, states may take diversionary actions. We need to explore more about it. Due to data limitations, this paper does not explore all regions in the world, which necessitates further exploration when data about the whole world is released by the ICOW project.

Conclusion

This study explores the curvilinear relationship between domestic turmoil and diversionary behaviors among countries in the Western Hemisphere, Western Europe, and the Middle East from 1962 to 2001. My results show that in moderate levels of domestic turmoil, nations tend to be more likely to initiate interstate conflicts to divert public attention from problems at home. At low levels of domestic turmoil, leaders have many options to deal with civil unrest rather than initiating a conflict abroad. At high levels of domestic turmoil, leaders may fear backfires if they initiate an international conflict over contentious issues. Contentious issues may provide opportunities for nations to divert, but the calculations of leaders may be different based on different levels of domestic turmoil. My findings contribute to the diversionary hypothesis by inspiring scholars to explore further whether this nonlinear relationship applies in broader cases and how such a potential relationship affects our tests of the diversionary hypothesis.

In the future, there are several directions we may take. The first is to explore how major powers are outliers in diversionary hypothesis testing. When looking at contentious issues

worldwide, we may not only need to pay special attention to America, but also to other great powers in the world system where they play dominant roles. We can deal with such great powers separately. We may also need to scale the number of domestic turmoil events based on the power of each country so that the effect of each number of domestic turmoil upon diversion can be compared across states in a more equal way (currently without scaling we assume the effect of each number of turmoil events has equal contribution to dispute initiation regardless in which country it happens). The second is to review previous findings by relying on non-linear models. Some previous research only looks at low levels of domestic turmoil, while others explore both high and moderate domestic turmoil. By introducing the concept of different levels of domestic turmoil, we may have new findings about the diversionary hypothesis.

Furthermore, the findings of this paper have important policy implications. In the past, we may assume that in higher levels of domestic unrest, diversionary behavior is more likely than in lower levels of domestic turmoil. But I find that it is in a moderate level of domestic turmoil that we are more likely to see diversionary actions. This means the threshold of diversionary actions is indeed lower than what we might expect. For instance, in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Vladimir Putin may have wanted to divert the public's dissatisfaction with the regime at a time when outside observers did not believe it was the right time to do so. Russia's ruling elites, which include the federal bureaucracy, big business, and heads of security forces, could not achieve new agreements concerning rent distributions among themselves faced with economic, social, and political problems (Yakovlev, 2021). A survey of Russian elites in 2020 shows that they diverge noticeably from Putin's statements on several crucial domestic issues, such as the need for a foreign agent law (Rivera, 2020). There were three purges against Russian elites in a single year in 2021 (Banks & Wilson, 2023). Opposition leaders such as Alexey Navalny successfully mobilized protests even in regions far from Moscow and his arrest partially caused one of the biggest mass unrests across Russia in history in 2021, with an estimated size of more than 250,000 participants in 190 cities (Ferraro, 2023). Popular revolts and elite defections in Russia's neighbors have caused an alternation of power, such as in Armenia during the Velvet Revolution 2018. Right before February 2022, Putin's approval rate was almost at its lowest historical level. Faced with economic stagnation and elite apprehension, Putin has incentives to take a diversionary conflict for the sake of regime stability.[9] In brief, the findings of this paper warn us that even a moderate level of domestic unrest, which is manifested as elite unrest, is especially detrimental to world peace, and preventive measures are needed at an early stage of witnessing a state's domestic unrest.

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Notes

1. There are some works that discuss a potential curvilinear relationship in certain contexts (e.g., James and Oneal 1991; Kisangani and Pickering 2011) but this paper contributes by empirically testing this relationship relying on ICOW data, covering a relatively long timespan. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
2. The ICOW project identifies eight militarized disputes (MIDs) related to this diplomatic conflict between 1995 and 2010.
3. The ICOW dataset is available to 2001 at present. The consumer price index (CPI), which is usually used as an indication of inflation level (proxy for domestic turmoil) in diversionary thesis literature, is available since 1962. I use CPI in Table A1 in the appendix as robustness check.
4. The Asian maritime claim data is not included in the version of the ICOW dataset that I utilize for my analyses.
5. One might argue that the highest level of domestic turmoil is civil war and thus that leaders should use diversionary force less often in such situations. To create consistency across my measures, I use only variables from the CNTS data, but this omits higher levels of intrastate violence.
6. To save space, the splines of the variable "peace years" are omitted from the tables.
7. In Table A3 in the Appendix, I added "elite squared" and fail to find statistical significance for this variable.
8. Government purges and crises show signs of elite instability, which is generally more intense and more openly violent than mass protest, but they are not as dangerous as guerrilla warfare or revolutions, so I use them as an indicator of a moderate level of domestic unrest.
9. For more argument about the importance of domestic politics in affecting Russia's war in Ukraine, see Blackburn (2022); for views that emphasize Putin's diversionary incentive, see Gomza (2022) and Marten (2021).

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Appendix

See Tables A1-A3 and Figures A1-A4.

Table A1. Rare Event Logistic Analysis of MID Initiation: 1962-2001

	(1) Linear model	(2) Curvilinear model	(3) CPI model
Total turmoil	0.0035 (0.0050)	0.0240* (0.0131)	
Total turmoil squared		-0.0003* (0.0002)	
CPI			0.0389 (0.0176)
CPI squared			-0.0006 (0.0004)
Issue salience	0.0309 (0.0329)	0.0314 (0.0249)	0.0273 (0.0340)
Rivalry	0.1732 (0.2542)	0.1496 (0.2244)	0.2060 (0.2504)
Relative power	-0.0823 (0.1536)	-0.0700 (0.1650)	-0.0768 (0.1585)
Joint democracy	-0.4116*** (0.1139)	-0.4039*** (0.1239)	-0.4527*** (0.1148)
Distance	-0.1213* (0.0664)	-0.1237*** (0.0404)	-0.1169* (0.0699)
Peace years	-0.1784*** (—)	-0.1797*** (—)	-0.1721*** (—)
Constant	-1.6762*** (0.2632)	-1.7411*** (0.2200)	-1.7710*** (0.2842)
Observations	5766	5766	5780
LL		-1089.0	-1155.1
χ^2	203.23***	207.96***	218.72***

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$ (one-tailed).

Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by issue/dyad in the linear model and CPI model. Peace years splines are not shown.

Table A2. Rare Event Logistic Analysis of MID Initiation: 1962-2001 by various models

	(1) Mass model	(2) Elite model	(3) War/revolution model
Mass turmoil	0.0039 (0.0051)		
Elite turmoil		0.1228[*] (0.0720)	
Guerrilla war/revolution			-0.0119 (0.0262)
Issue salience	0.0311 (0.0329)	0.0302 (0.0318)	0.0304 (0.0328)
Rivalry	0.1745 (0.2544)	0.1726 (0.2595)	0.1868 (0.2564)
Relative power	-0.0828 (0.1540)	-0.0721 (0.1528)	-0.0884 (0.1534)
Joint democracy	-0.4130[***] (0.1145)	-0.3939[***] (0.1176)	-0.4193[***] (0.1148)
Distance	-0.1219[*] (0.0657)	-0.1110[*] (0.0689)	-0.1181[*] (0.0688)
Peace years	-0.1783[***] (0.0377)	-0.1787[***] (0.0378)	-0.1778[***] (0.0378)
Constant	-1.6725[***] (0.2624)	-1.7218[***] (0.2605)	-1.6436[***] (0.2682)
Observations	5766	5766	5766
χ^2	197.49[***]	201.44[***]	214.76[***]

Note: [*] $p<0.05$, [**] $p<0.01$, [***] $p<0.001$ (one-tailed).

Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by issue/dyad. Peace years splines are not shown.

Table A3. Logistic Analysis of MID Initiation Based on Elite and Issue Salience: 1962-2001

	(1) Elite squared model	(2) High salience model	(3) Low salience model	(4) Very high salience model
Total turmoil		0.0266 (0.0188)	0.0207 (0.0215)	0.1385** (0.0539)
Total turmoil squared		-0.0004* (0.0002)	-0.0003 (0.0003)	-0.0068** (0.0023)
Elite turmoil	0.1382 (0.1132)			
Elite turmoil squared	-0.0050 (0.0276)			
Issue salience	0.0299 (0.0316)	0.0145 (0.0604)	-0.0781 (0.0841)	0.1761 (0.2304)
Rivalry	0.1607 (0.2603)	0.1425 (0.3083)	0.2169 (0.4076)	0.2859 (0.4494)
Relative power	-0.0730 (0.1530)	-0.1378 (0.2048)	0.1206 (0.2727)	-0.3928 (0.3404)
Joint democracy	-0.3963*** (0.1182)	-0.3973** (0.1530)	-0.5298** (0.2205)	-0.4050 (0.3958)
Distance	-0.1119 (0.0690)	-0.1555* (0.0813)	-0.1102 (0.0943)	0.0147 (0.0983)
Peace years	-0.1777*** (0.0378)	-0.1201** (0.0507)	-0.2507*** (0.0599)	-0.1584 (0.1170)
Constant	-1.7285*** (0.2636)	-1.6096** (0.5803)	-1.2731** (0.4491)	-3.3414 (2.8332)
Observations	5766	3318	2448	622
LL	-1154.9	-669.8	-478.4	-159.6
χ^2	215.17***	123.83***	105.18***	251.45***

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$ (one-tailed).
Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by issue/dyad. Peace years splines are not shown.
"High salience" refers to a salience score above 6; "Low salience" refers to a salience score equal to or less than 6; "Very high salience" refers to a salience score above 9.
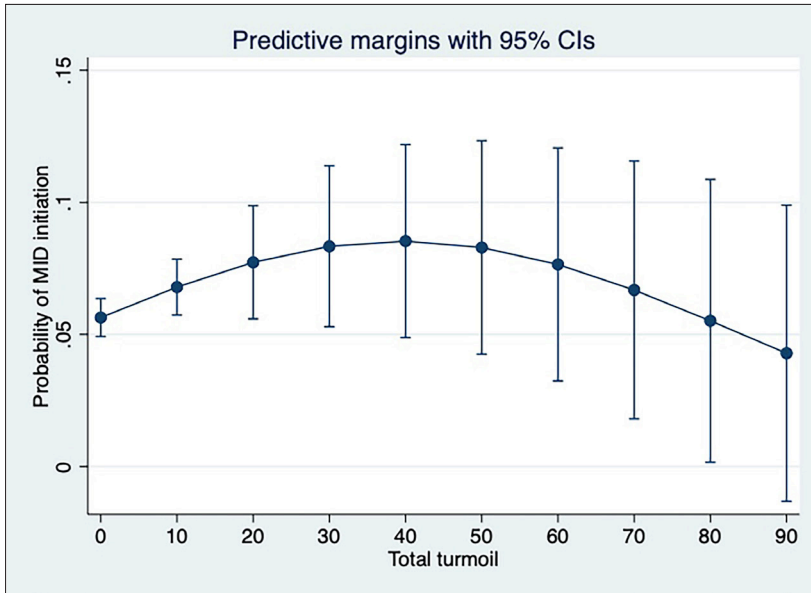
Figure A1. Firthlogit result of the effect of total turmoil on MID initiation
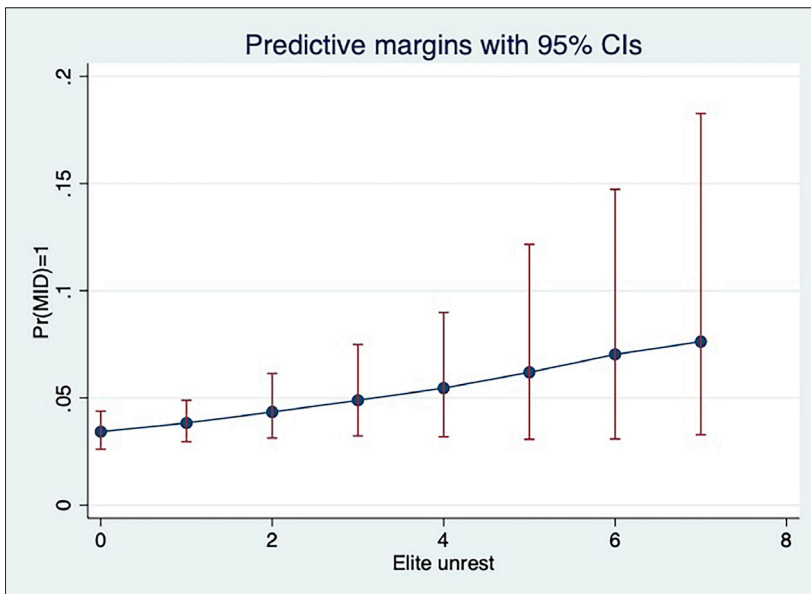

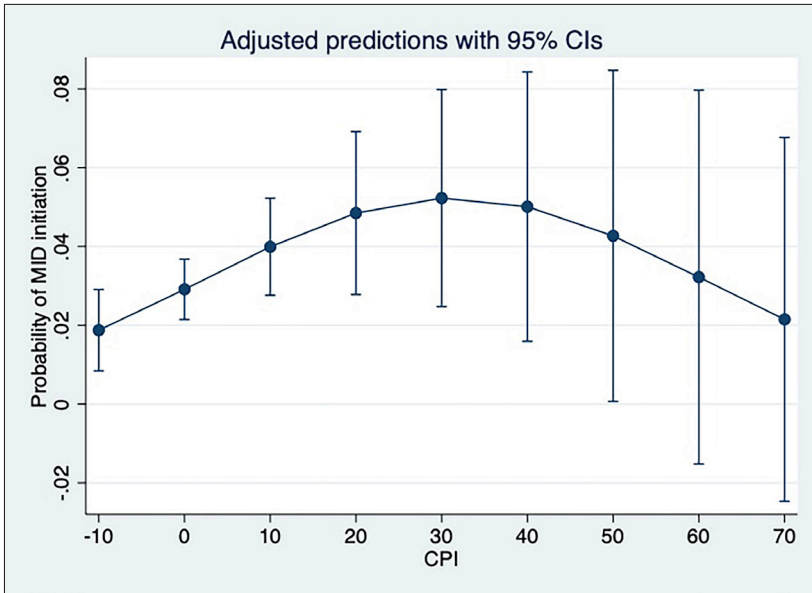**Figure A2.** Rare event logit result of the effect of elite unrest on MID initiation

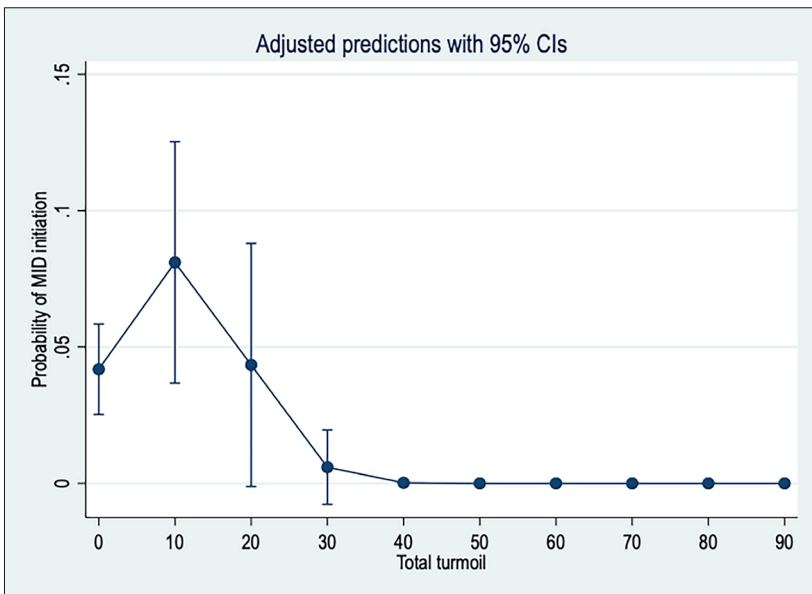**Figure A3.** Logit result of the effect of CPI on MID initiation

Figure A4. Logit result of the effect of turmoil on MID initiation for very salient issues (salience score > 9)