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Sizing Up the Adversary: Leader Attributes and Coercion in International Conflict

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Abstract

Leaders negotiate, not states. Yet the extensive body of work on coercive diplomacy in international relations pays little attention to variation among leaders. In contrast, we argue that individual-level attributes directly influence leaders' beliefs about their own military capabilities and, by extension, their selection of disputes. Specifically, leaders with combat experience and careers in national militaries are relatively better judges of their own military power. As a consequence, targets tend to take their threats more seriously. In contrast, leaders who have military careers but lack combat experience tend to be less selective in their demands and correspondingly less successful when they make threats. Similar patterns hold for those with rebel experience. Drawing on new data on leader attributes, we find strong evidence that these leader-level attributes influence both dispute and compellent threat reciprocation. This leader-level approach provides a new explanation for why some countries initiate disputes against determined adversaries that are likely to escalate rather than back down.

Keywords

leaders, conflict, militarized disputes, political leadership

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History tells us that leaders vary enormously in their willingness to make threats and back them up. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was famously cautious in his rhetoric (Widmaier 2014); by contrast, three generations of dynastic North Korean leaders have proven unusually prone to brinkmanship and colorful threats. When Kim Jong Un next threatens to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire," how should we know whether to take him seriously? A leader's individual-level attributes would seem to matter a great deal when judging the meaning of such ultimatums, but they are not something that social scientists understand very well.

The vast majority of work on conflict, threats, and reciprocation glosses over personal-level variation along this dimension. Instead, scholars have relied on the assumption that leaders are functionally identical regardless of their underlying attributes, experiences, and backgrounds. The boldness of this assumption is an acknowledged problem. Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (1992, 322), for example, note the need to account for individual-level attributes but are only able to address it with national-level data. Very little work in the mainstream international relations literature addresses the tendencies of actual leaders, especially in conflict and bargaining contexts.

There are several reasons for this. Foremost, system-level theorizing as well as the broader effort to distance political research from "great man" arguments about the origins of political phenomena pushed these considerations into the background. More recently, the dominance of the bargaining model of war, combined with a dearth of systematic data on leader-level attributes, limited the viability of leader-level arguments.[1] However, as the North Korean case implies, the role of leaders in determining both the threat behavior and risk acceptance of states cannot be safely left to the error term.

This article focuses on how the past military experiences of individual leaders affect the effectiveness of coercive threats in international crises. Fearon (1994), Schultz (1998), and others suggest that the ability of states to make credible commitments—to war, peace, or diplomacy—is essential to their success in international crisis situations. The majority of this work addresses the extent to which domestic political institutions impact the credibility of a leader's commitments. In particular, the threats made by democratic leaders are thought to be more credible than those made by dictators because the threat of punishment at the ballot box makes it harder for a democratic leader to renege on a commitment. Recent work, however, has questioned both the theoretical and empirical validity of this claim, with some scholars (e.g., Downes and Sechser 2012; Snyder and Borghard 2011; Trachtenberg 2012) challenging the very existence of audience costs and, by extension, their coercive leverage.

We take a different approach, exploring the implications of variation in the backgrounds of individual leaders for the effectiveness of commitments. Our argument is that some individual-level attributes and experiences influence a leader's beliefs about the efficacy of military power, and those beliefs in turn shape the riskiness and outcomes of the coercive threats that they issue.[2] Leaders with certain

backgrounds disproportionately initiate imprudent challenges that are more likely to be reciprocated by adversaries. In contrast, other leaders are more selective, issuing coercive threats only when military and political conditions are favorable to them. Put differently, certain individuals are more willing to play with bad hands—an obvious point known to any poker player, but one that has generally escaped attention in international relations.[3]

In our view, the prior military experiences of leaders are particularly important because they are so clearly related to conflict and escalation—these are experiences that leaders would almost certainly draw on in a crisis situation. We identify three military experiences that we associate with systematic tendencies in the way leaders issue threats and use of military force.

First, we theorize that those with prior careers in their state's regular military will be more optimistic about the ability of coercive threats to achieve political objectives. As a result, these leaders are less selective about issuing coercive threats, and their threats therefore are correspondingly more likely to fail.

Second, we argue that substantial combat experience conditions the experience of military careerists in a way that will bias leaders in the opposite direction, tempering leaders' optimism about the ability of military force to achieve political aims. Leaders with combat experience are more careful about when they issue coercive threats, are more likely to issue them under favorable circumstances, and therefore are more likely to be successful.

Third, and finally, we associate a path to power through armed rebellion with leaders' coercive bargaining behavior. Taking up arms against a government is treasonous and potentially deadly and therefore indicates a willingness to gamble on the use of force in marginal situations. All else equal, former rebels are likely to be more risk acceptant than those who rose to power through stable institutions. Moreover, a revolutionary background indicates some level of exposure to and comfort with the use of force as a coercive tool. Our expectation is that leaders with this background will therefore be less cautious when selecting adversaries and see more of their coercive threats reciprocated.

Pulling these threads together, our core contention (and empirical finding) is that leaders with a career background in the military, but without the combat experience to temper it, are significantly more likely to issue threats under unfavorable conditions and are therefore more likely to have their threats reciprocated. Former rebels are similarly risk acceptant.

To establish this contention empirically, we rely on the Leader Experience and Attribute Descriptions (LEAD) data set, which provides data on heads of state from 1869 to 2004 (Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015). Along with the length and dates of their tenure and paths to power, and a set of personal characteristics, LEAD contains data on the rebel backgrounds and military service history of each head of state. With these data, we assess whether or not career military, combat, and rebel experiences are related to the success and failure of compellent threats (Sechser 2011) in international crises. In this sense, we build directly on Saunders (2011), Chiozza and

Goemans (2011), and Horowitz and Stam (2014), who assess the relationship between leader attributes and conflict. This article extends that logic by assessing its implications for coercive diplomacy.[4]

Leader Attributes, Perceptions of Power, and Coercive Threats

Coercive threats occur in the context of contentious bargaining over political disputes. Their purpose is to resolve interstate disputes both efficiently and favorably: efficiently by avoiding costs of armed conflict and favorably by securing concessions from the adversary. In other words, the aim of a coercive challenge is to persuade the target to capitulate without fighting: as Schelling (1966, 10) notes, "successful threats are those that do not have to be carried out." For a coercive threat to work, the coercer must persuade the target that the cost of meeting the coercer's demand is less than the cost of resistance. The target will acquiesce rather than risk a military confrontation if the demand is sufficiently small and the threat of punishment sufficiently large.

In coercive diplomacy, perceptions about the balance of military power shape the strategic behavior of both sides. The balance of power shapes a target's calculations about the costs and benefits of acquiescence. A target is unlikely to comply with a demand if it believes the coercer does not possess the military wherewithal to enforce the demand. Coercers therefore must possess a sufficient level of military might in order to intimidate the target into submission (e.g., George and Simons 1994; Byman and Waxman 2001; Art and Cronin 2003). This is not to say that the coercer must be able to defeat the target in wartime: coercive threats from weaker states can succeed so long as the target is unwilling to endure the costs of a war, even if the target is likely to prevail (Sechser 2010). Nevertheless, military capabilities allow coercers to threaten higher levels of punishment, thus increasing targets' expected costs of standing firm.

Military power shapes the decision-making of coercers as well. At the outset of a crisis, a coercer must decide whether to initiate a challenge at all, and if so, how much to demand from the target. These decisions require coercers to balance two potentially competing objectives—coercers would like to win the largest possible concessions from targets, but they would also prefer to avoid the use of costly force. There is tension between these two goals: larger demands, while more rewarding, are also more likely to be resisted with force. Power allows coercers to make larger demands—their credible threat of severe punishment can wring greater concessions out of targets (Fearon 1995). Compounding this effect, military power can also insulate coercers from the costs of conflict, allowing them to make larger and riskier demands (Sechser 2018). Military power thus enables more aggressive behavior because coercers are more willing to accept the possibility of a military confrontation when that confrontation is less costly.

While the balance of military power is a key factor in shaping the dynamics of coercive bargaining, crisis adversaries do not necessarily share the same beliefs about it. Indeed, one of the key insights to emerge from the literature on bargaining is that wars are sometimes a consequence of incomplete information (Blainey 1973; Fearon 1995; Morrow 1999). Even rational leaders may overestimate their own military capabilities, or underestimate those of their adversaries, simply because of the unavailability of accurate information and intelligence. Worse, psychological and organizational biases can skew the interpretation of incoming information about the military balance, leading to incorrect beliefs (Jervis 1976; Johnson 2009; Altman 2015). When leaders are overly optimistic about their military capabilities, they may miscalculate by making demands that are too large, refusing demands they should accept, or escalating when they should back down.[5]

In an environment of imperfect information, leaders rely on signals to communicate—and sometimes obscure—information about their true military capabilities. Leaders who can convincingly signal their military capabilities can accrue significant advantages in coercive bargaining, allowing them to obtain better deals without fighting. Moreover, leaders have incentives to obtain the most accurate information about their adversary's capabilities, in order to avoid miscalculations that might yield inefficient bargaining outcomes. Yet not all signals are created equal: signals can range from empty "cheap talk" to costly actions that clearly reveal a state's true military power. Whether a leader can effectively persuade an adversary of its military capabilities depends heavily on the credibility of its signals (Jervis 1970; Fearon 1997).

Military Experiences and Coercive Bargaining

National leaders have a great deal of personal discretion over the actions of the countries they represent. This autonomy tends to be more pronounced in the context of foreign policy crises, where information asymmetries between leaders and those who might constrain them can be particularly substantial (Baum and Potter 2008; Potter and Baum 2010). Individual-level biases and tendencies therefore matter a great deal, even after accounting for the undeniable importance of systemic factors, domestic political institutions, and material power.

Research by Goldgeier (1994), Jervis (1976), Horowitz and Stam (2014), Kennedy (2011), Saunders (2011), Colgan (2013), and others suggests that prior experiences play a critical role in shaping the beliefs and behavior of leaders once they enter office. This literature consistently holds that experience with the military and the use of force particularly influences the way leaders evaluate the costs, benefits, and risks of armed conflict (Sechser 2004). This salience is magnified because military service often occurs in late adolescence and early adulthood when durable future beliefs about the world are shaped (Roberts, Caspi, and Moffitt 2003).

But not all military service is equivalent: different types of military experience may lead to different expectations about behavior and outcomes in militarized

disputes. We consider two overlapping but distinct sorts of military experience that we argue have interactive and crosscutting effects on the behavior of leaders: military careers and combat experience: Career service is in reference to years spent as a professional soldier such that one would say that being in the military was a person's primary career occupation.[6] By combat experience we mean personal exposure to physical violence while in uniform.

A substantial of scholarship finds that individuals with military careers see the world differently than civilians. In particular, they tend to be more optimistic about the utility of military force for solving national problems (Sechser 2004). Military service socializes individuals in the use of controlled violence (Lovell 1964; Thomson 1968). Over a career, this can weaken their inhibitions against war and leave leaders more likely to see the use of force as the best solution to foreign policy problems (Walt 1987, 159–60; Posen 1984, 52–53). As Sagan (1994, 76) argues, "the professional focus of attention on warfare also makes military officers skeptical of non-military alternatives to war, whereas civilian leaders often place stronger hopes on diplomatic and economic methods of long-term conflict resolution." Having been trained in the use of military weaponry, military careerists may also exaggerate both threats to national security and the ability of military action to solve them (Snyder 1984; Van Evera 1999). In short, when former military careerists tackle foreign policy problems, they are more likely to be confident about military solutions.

This optimism can have important consequences for the way leaders approach coercive bargaining (Sechser 2004; Horowitz and Stam 2014). If leaders are systematically more optimistic about the utility of military force, they may approach bargaining situations more assertively. These leaders will tend to make more aggressive demands, preferring to risk conflict rather than accept a compromise. But, as the literature on bargaining and war demonstrates, basing diplomatic strategy on overly optimistic estimates of the military balance is a recipe for failure. When a leader's demands are based on systematically biased beliefs about the military balance, those demands are more likely to be seen by the adversary as excessive and therefore resisted. In short, leaders with military experience will tend to initiate larger and less successful challenges in coercive bargaining situations.[7]

We argue, however, that the impact of a military career military is conditioned by combat experience. There are critical differences between individuals who have spent their careers in noncombat environments and those who have experienced the realities of war (Horowitz and Stam 2014). Soldiers with actual combat experience witness firsthand the capabilities and limitations of military power, giving them a more cautious and realistic outlook on what force can and cannot accomplish (Huntington 1957; Janowitz 1960, Betts 1977). Furthermore, the experience of fighting on the battlefield provides individuals with visceral experience with the costs and limits of military combat. These experiences can create both pragmatic and moral doubts about the use of force. Survey research by Brunk, Secrest, and Tamashiro (1990), for example, suggests that combat veterans are far less likely than control

groups to believe that the use of military force is justified. By contrast, those who have not seen combat are less familiar with the technical limitations, logistical hurdles, and unanticipated events that can undermine battlefield operations. The implication of these arguments is that combat experience can temper the optimistic biases that military careers can generate. As a result, leaders with combat experience will be less likely to exhibit the same patterns of behavior in coercive bargaining situations.[8]

Two general hypotheses about the military experiences of leaders follow from this discussion, both of which emphasize the importance of leaders' life experiences. The first hypothesis posits that leaders with military careers but no combat experience should make less effective coercive challenges because they are overly optimistic about threatening force and more willing to initiate threats under less favorable circumstances. Even if these leaders are also more willing to go to war, however, they are not necessarily better able to communicate their resolve to the adversary. The result is a higher rate of threats from leaders with noncombat military experience, but without a commensurate increase in success:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Leaders who spent their career in the military but did not serve in combat will have their coercive challenges reciprocated more often, on average, than other leaders.

Along similar lines, if misplaced optimism causes leaders with military careers but no combat experience to be more willing to initiate coercive threats, then it stands to reason that they would also make higher-level demands, on average, than their veteran and civilian counterparts:

> **Hypothesis 2:** Leaders who spent their career in the military but did not serve in combat will make higher value coercive demands, on average, than other leaders.

We consider an additional form of military experience as well—that of rebel commanders. Many prominent national leaders in the twentieth century, from Mao to Ben Gurion, were rebels before becoming heads of state. Taking up arms against a national government is often a losing endeavor with potentially dire consequences. The payoffs, however, can be worth the risk, particularly for those who serve in leadership positions in the rebellion. Moreover, as is the case with service in national militaries, rebel experience tends to shape individuals' views about the use of force. All else equal, we anticipate that leaders who previously self-selected into being rebels are likely more risk acceptant than those who do not.

Former rebel leaders are likely to have acquired beliefs that favor the use of force. Experience as a successful rebel leader socializes individuals to believe that the types of aggressive behaviors that might be risky for someone else are not, in fact, risky for them. Those who enter office through violent means, such as a coup or revolution, have taken the ultimate risk in rebelling against their national

government to seize power and have acquired high levels of martial efficacy during the process.[9] This not only suggests higher levels of *ex ante* risk acceptance but greater confidence in their ability to use force to achieve their goals (Colgan 2013). Horowitz and Stam's (2014) findings confirm this theoretical intuition, showing that leaders with former rebel experience are significantly more likely to initiate militarized disputes than their counterparts without rebel experience. At the same time, rebels who become heads of state constitute a sample of individuals who have self-selected into military combat (unlike members of organized militaries, who often have no say over the decision to fight). Further, these individuals have witnessed the efficacy, rather than limitations, of military force, since their military victories are what allowed them to become heads of state in the first place. In short, the rebels we observe becoming national leaders are not a random sample; rather, they constitute a narrow slice of rebels who have all experienced exceptionally high levels of military success. Their views about military action are likely to be colored by these positive experiences with force.

The implication is that former rebels are likely to be less careful in their selection of adversaries and less discerning in the circumstances which they threaten or use force. The risk-acceptant nature of prior rebels as well as their optimism about militarized threats—optimism validated by life experience—means that they will disproportionately initiate coercive threats in more marginal circumstances.

Hypothesis 3: Leaders with rebel experience will have their coercive challenges reciprocated more often, on average, than other leaders.

A critic might respond that leader attributes could be endogenous to the leader selection process. In other words, leaders might be selected because of their military experiences, particularly when a country faces a high risk of external conflict. While this argument is consistent with some strands of international relations theory, the proposition is empirically questionable for several reasons. First, studies on leaders who were randomly selected into office have demonstrated that leader effects persist even after accounting for the possibility of selection (Jones and Olken 2005; Besley, Montalvo, and Reynal-Querol 2011; Horowitz and Stam 2014). Second, even when foreign policy plays a prominent role in elections (such as in the United States in 2004), many more people vote on the basis of domestic political issues such as the economy than on foreign policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Holsti 2004). Third, and finally, to the limited extent that voters and selectorates care about foreign policy, they are more likely to judge policy platforms than background experiences when thinking about leader selection. This, for example, is why Ronald Reagan, who spent World War II on a movie stage, was considered more hawkish than nuclear submariner Jimmy Carter in the 1980 US election cycle. The electorate focused more on perceptions of competence based on Reagan's stated views than his background. While we return to this point later, it is not enough to dismiss the potential role of leader experiences at the outset simply based on selection into office.

Research Design

Scholars of coercive diplomacy have evaluated threats by adopting the straightforward assumption that more selective or credible threats will be more likely to succeed. Schultz and others, for example, have evaluated the credibility of coercive threats by measuring the reciprocation of militarized interstate disputes (Smith 1998; Schultz 1998). The logic is that a target's decision to reciprocate a dispute is a revealed preference indicator of how it evaluates the threat.

We therefore begin our analysis by testing whether the leaders we theorize to be less selective about initiating coercive threats experience more reciprocation than leaders who are more selective. Furthermore, leaders who are less selective and therefore less likely to make successful threats are also more likely to make higher-level demands. By contrast, leaders who are more risk averse in their selection will see more of their threats succeed.

We begin by examining the outcomes of coercive challenges in the case of compellent threats using the Militarized Compellent Threats (MCT) data set (Sechser 2011), which covers the time period from 1918 to 2001. The dependent variable in this analysis is whether the target refused a compellent threat or backed down. We begin with the MCT database because Downes and Sechser (2012) note that the vast majority of cases contained in alternative data sets contain no explicit coercive threat. While our theoretical argument should apply to cases of deterrence as well as compellence, a data set of strictly compellent threats provides a strong initial test for our theory.

We then shift to analyzing the reciprocation of militarized disputes using the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID\) data set. For these models, the unit of analysis in our initial models is the militarized interstate dispute. The dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator of whether the initiator's challenge is reciprocated (1 if the militarized dispute initiation is reciprocated and 0 otherwise). Our core models using the MID data assess the period from 1869 to 2004, though we also assess 1945 to 2004 to test the robustness of our argument in this shorter period commonly used in other related research.

While the limits of the MID data set are well known, we confirm our results in this context for several reasons. First, explicit threats, such as those covered by the MCT data set, are only one of the ways that states attempt to leverage one another in international politics. A substantial number of the threats in the international system are implicit. For example, US President Truman's decision to deploy B-29s to Guam in 1947 during the Berlin Airlift was designed to show the Soviet Union that the United States was taking the issue seriously and would not back down. However, the B-29 deployment was not accompanied by a public threat against the Soviet Union. That does not make it less of a militarized challenge—just a challenge of a different stripe than one accompanied by a compellent threat.

Second, only focusing on compellent threats excludes deterrence-based activities or troop movements, deployments, and threats designed to preserve the status

quo rather than to change the status quo. There is no reason, a priori, to ignore deterrent threats in a broader study of when militarized challenges are likely to escalate in general.

Third, there is no theoretical reason that the noise that Downes and Sechser (2012) identify in the MID data set biases the data in favor of our findings. If anything, given the specificity of our argument, the addition of that noise should make identifying a clear relationship more difficult, biasing against our theory. This is not to say that such noise is desirable, just that it does not advantage our proposed explanation and arguably makes it less likely that we will find support for our hypotheses.

Given potential concern about the MID data, in the Online Appendix, we also show that the results are consistent if we switch to violent reciprocation of MIDs instead of just MID reciprocation.

We test our hypotheses with independent variables drawn from the LEAD data set (Ellis, Stam, and Horowitz 2015). The LEAD data set adds information on leader background characteristics to the universe of leaders covered by the Archigos data set developed by Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza (2009).

Career is 1 if the primary occupation of the leader prior to entering office was serving in the military and 0 otherwise. It is not necessary for the military to be the immediate prior occupation of the leader, nor the leader's sole prior occupation (Eisenhower, e.g., was the President of Columbia University between his service in the military and the executive office)—only that the primary occupation of the leader be a military career.

Combat is 1 if the leader participated in combat as a member of a uniformed military and 0 otherwise. Exposure to combat in this context counts as being engaged in military tasks in an active war zone.[10] While it would be optimal to have a variable indicating whether or not a leader actually fired a weapon or was fired upon, the key theoretical mechanism at work in our argument is exposure to the fear of death rather than actual enemy fire. Even if an individual is not actually fired upon, deployment to an active combat zone is likely to trigger such a fear and is therefore sufficient for testing our argument.[11]

Rebel is 1 if the leader previously participated in armed rebellion against the government of a nation-state and 0 otherwise. This definition is broad, since it encompasses those who foment coups as well as those engaged in long-term guerrilla warfare, but it captures the risk propensity and efficacy beliefs that are of interest since all involve dangerous military activities conducted against a national government. Actors are rebels if they take up arms against the government in control of the territory, regardless of whether they, or the international community, perceive that government as legitimate.

We also control for a number of covariates that could bias our estimates and that prior research suggests could be related to reciprocation.[12] Given the prominence of regime type in explanations of national credibility, we include a *Democracy* variable (1 if the initiating state is a democracy and 0 otherwise), which we derive from the

Polity IV data (Jaggers and Gurr 1995). Following Schultz (2001), we control for the power dynamic within the initiator/potential reciprocator dyad (*Side A % of Total Dyadic CINC Score*, major power status of both sides), whether the states are *Contiguous*, and the degree of similarity in their alliance portfolios and positions (*Dyadic Similarity (S), Side A:* τ^{β} *with System Leader*). Finally, the stakes under dispute may matter in how states respond to militarized challenges and are important for testing Hypothesis 2. We account for the *Status Quo Evaluation of Target*. Countries are much more likely to stand strong, for example, on territorial issues than on matters of minor policy. Therefore, following prior research, we include several measures of the nature of the initiator's challenge: *Territory, Government/Regime Change, Policy*, or *Other*. Each is 1 if the condition is active for the particular dispute in question and 0 otherwise. When we run models testing Hypothesis 2, we exclude these variables and instead use as a dependent variable *High Value*, which is 1 if the initiated MID involves territory or government/regime change and 0 otherwise.

Results

Table 1 describes the results of our initial logit models on reciprocation. The control variables mirror those used by Downes and Sechser (2012), to allow for comparability with their findings.[13]

The results from Table 1 provide support for some, but not all, of our hypotheses. Overall, the models demonstrate the crucial role that prior military experience plays in shaping the way adversaries respond to coercive threats. As predicted, those with military careers appear more likely to see their threats rejected, though the presence of the interaction term means we quickly turn to substantive effects below. Arguably, these leaders have been most clearly socialized into thinking about the use of military force as appropriate in a wide variety of situations, making them less selective when initiating militarized disputes. Thus, they initiate more marginal confrontations with more resolved adversaries, increasing the probability that their threats will fail. We do not find support using the MCT data for Hypothesis 3 concerning the behavior of leaders with prior rebel experience.

The interaction terms show a negative and significant relationship between military careers without combat experience and compellent threat success. Two examples from our data illustrate this relationship. In 1985, for example, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya (who served in the military but saw no combat) threatened military action against Tunisia unless they proceeded toward a political union.[14] Tunisia, however, judged the threat to be idle (correctly, as it turned out) and declined to capitulate, instead expelling 253 Libyans it accused of threatening security and declaring 30 Libyan diplomats *persona non grata* (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 2000). The results were similar when Hafez al-Assad of Syria (another leader with military but not combat experience) massed troops on the Jordanian border in November 1980 in an effort to compel Jordan to cease harboring members of the Muslim Brotherhood, taking a moderate tone toward Israel, and providing military support

Table 1. Leadership Attributes and Compellent Threat Failure.

	(1) Model 1: 1918–2001 β/*SE*	(2) Model 2: 1946–2001 β/*SE*
Combat	0.104 (.487)	0.202 (1.085)
Career	1.311* (.739)	16.884† (1.377)
Combat × career	−2.016** (.911)	−17.842† (1.799)
Rebel	0.316 (.404)	0.121 (0.657)
Democracy	0.483 (.480)	0.777 (.763)
Contiguity	−0.529 (.443)	0.028 (.652)
Side A % of total dyadic CINC score	−0.020 (.711)	1.461 (1.051)
Both sides major powers	−0.721 (.818)	−0.495 (1.371)
Only side A major power	0.409 (.501)	1.320 (1.011)
Only side B major power	−1.712* (.911)	0.164 (1.198)
Dyadic similarity (*S*)	0.434 (.705)	1.889* (1.051)
Side A: τβ with system leader	−0.202 (.579)	−0.609 (1.256)
Status quo evaluation of target	−0.874 (.606)	−2.870*** (1.081)
Side A revision type: territory	−0.104 (.380)	0.118 (0.765)
Side A revision type: regime/government	−2.540**** (.621)	−3.253* (1.963)
Side A revision type: policy	-0.174 (.353)	−0.229 (0.868)
Side A revision type: other	0.253 (.401)	0.813 (0.880)
Constant	0.780 (.963)	−1.902 (1.501)
N	229	113

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. CINC = Composite Index of National Capability.
†$p < .10$.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.
****$p < .001$.

to Iraq. King Hussein of Jordan rushed troops to the border and announced that it was prepared to fight to "defend every inch of Jordanian soil." In the end, Syria drew down its troops and Jordan followed suit (Sturchler 2007).[15]

Figure 1 (which is derived from Table 1, model 1) shows a significant difference between leaders with military careers who did not see combat and those who have seen combat.[16] Compare, for example, the two estimates on the right-hand side of the chart. These estimates describe two types of leaders, both of whom spent their careers in the military: one type that saw combat during their military career and one that did not. The probability of compellent threat failure is 47 percent for leaders who saw combat during their careers, but jumps to 88 percent for leaders who did not. The confidence intervals around these predictions, however, are relatively large and overlap in several of the conditions, likely due to the small sample size of the MCT data set.

To extend the analysis and demonstrate robustness using a larger sample size, we now turn to models based on the MID data set. For models generated using the MIDs

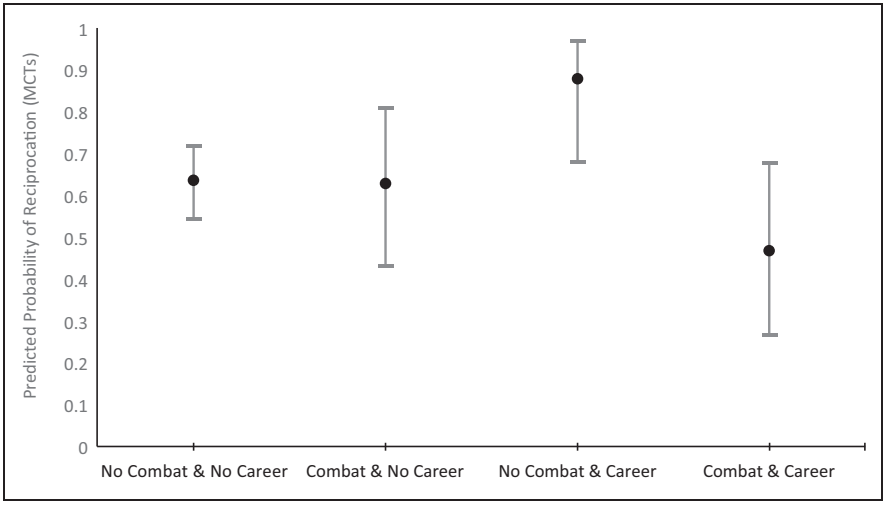


Figure 1. Probability of compellent threat failure, 1918 to 2001.

data set, to ensure comparability with prior research, we loosely base our initial models on Schultz (2001). Given the greater variation on the dependent variable in comparison with the MID data set, we use conditional logit equations on the dichotomous measure of dispute reciprocation. We include initiator-country-fixed effects to account for unmodeled country-level attributes, helping us isolate the relative effect of leader qualities.

In Table 2, models 1 and 2 add our key variables of interest to an updated version of Schultz's (2001) models of dispute reciprocation, looking at the entire time period, 1869–2004 (model 1), as well as 1946–2004 (model 2). Models 3 and 4 add an interaction between combat experience and our military career variable, so that we can more explicitly test Hypothesis 1.

Before describing the full results, it is worth noting that even absent the control variables, the relationship between key leadership attributes and reciprocation is statistically significant and signed in the hypothesized direction.[17] That said, the statistical controls described above are likely correlated with both our dependent and explanatory variables, and excluding them therefore runs the risk of omitted variable bias.

Models 1–4 further demonstrate how prior military experience shapes coercive behavior. As Hypothesis 1 predicts, the interaction between military careers and combat experience is negative and significant, meaning that leaders of this type are less likely to see their militarized disputes reciprocated. It is therefore plausible that, as we have argued, prior combat experience makes leaders especially careful to select only adversaries who are likely to back down. Interestingly, the sign on the combat variable reverses when we just look at the post–World War II period, though

Table 2. Leadership Attributes and Militarized Dispute Reciprocation.

	(1) Model 1: 1869–2004 β/*SE*	(2) Model 2: 1946–2004 β/*SE*	(3) Model 3: 1869–2004 (Interaction) β/*SE*	(4) Model 4: 1946–2004 (Interaction) β/*SE*
Career	.452*** (.150)	.486** (0.203)	.905† (0.259)	.864*** (.296)
Combat	−0.256** (.116)	.055 (.160)	−.148 (.126)	.207 (0.182)
Combat × career			−.648** (.296)	−.638* (.357)
Rebel	.212* (.119)	.214 (.169)	.230* (.119)	.236 (.170)
Democracy	−.191 (.172)	.224 (.236)	−.182 (.172)	.227 (.236)
Contiguity	.121 (.095)	−.030 (.123)	.118 (.095)	−.046 (.124)
Side A: % of total dyadic CINC score	.395** (.186)	.535** (.258)	.399** (.186)	.557** (.259)
Both sides major powers	.404* (.235)	.371 (.356)	.394* (.235)	.394 (.357)
Only side A major power	−.054 (.168)	.378 (.303)	−.073 (.168)	.386 (.304)
Only side B major power	.309** (.153)	.297 (.207)	.308** (.153)	.293 (.207)
Side A revision type: territory	.363*** (.126)	.479*** (.165)	.356*** (.126)	.477*** (.165)
Side A revision type: policy	−1.325† (.095)	−1.232† (.119)	−1.342† (.096)	−1.250† (.119)
Side A revision type: regime/ government	.538** (.220)	.491* (.276)	.547** (.221)	.500* (.277)
Side A revision type: other	−.921** (.379)	−.985** (.501)	−.922** (.380)	−.969* (.505)
Number of alliances: sides A and B	−.014 (.036)	−.055 (.041)	−.020 (.036)	−.057 (.041)
N	3,382	2,227	3,382	2,227
Pseudo R^2	.093	.093	.095	.095

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. *SE* = standard error.
†$p < .10$.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

it is not significant. This suggests that it is possible, though more research is required, that combat experience is leading to different behaviors in the post–World War II era.

Figure 2, which we derive from model 3 in Table 2, illustrates graphically how the predicted probability of MID reciprocation varies across combinations of *Career* and *Combat*.

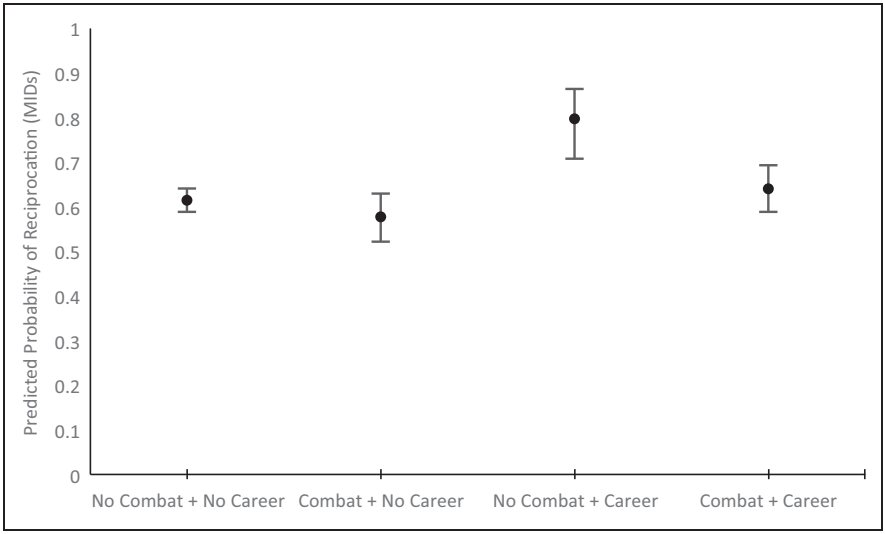


Figure 2. The probability of Militarized Interstate Disputes reciprocation, 1869 to 2004.

Figure 2 demonstrates the hypothesized difference between those with military careers that have seen combat and all other categories. In the full sample, dispute reciprocation occurs more than 79 percent of the time for leaders with military careers, but no combat experience (third estimate from the left). In contrast, those with military careers and combat experience exhibit a lower reciprocation rate of just 64 percent (far right estimate), a difference that is statistically significant ($p < .05$) in a two-sample t test with equal variances. To illustrate with an example, Qaddafi (who was an officer but saw no actual fighting) initiated twenty-seven disputes and had roughly 83 percent of them reciprocated.[18]

Notably, there are just twenty-one leaders in our data set who spent all or nearly all of their careers in the military prior to assuming office as the head of state but did not experience combat. This list, however, includes some impressively unsavory characters, such as Hafez al-Assad (20 MIDs), al-Bashir (10 MIDs), Chavez (4 MIDs), Mobutu (20 MIDs), Noriega (2 MIDs), Qaddafi (27 MIDs), Barre (8 MIDs), and Tudjman (5 MIDs).[19]

Figure 3 provides the first differences for the interactive combinations displayed in Figure 2.

Turning to Hypothesis 3, which can be assessed in the context of these same models, the coefficient for former rebel leaders is consistently positive and significant in the full model, though only at the .10 level, providing limited support for the hypothesis. In the smaller sample, the coefficient is positive but not significant. One possible explanation for this finding is that if former rebels directly participated in combat while they were rebels (a variation that we are unable to model with

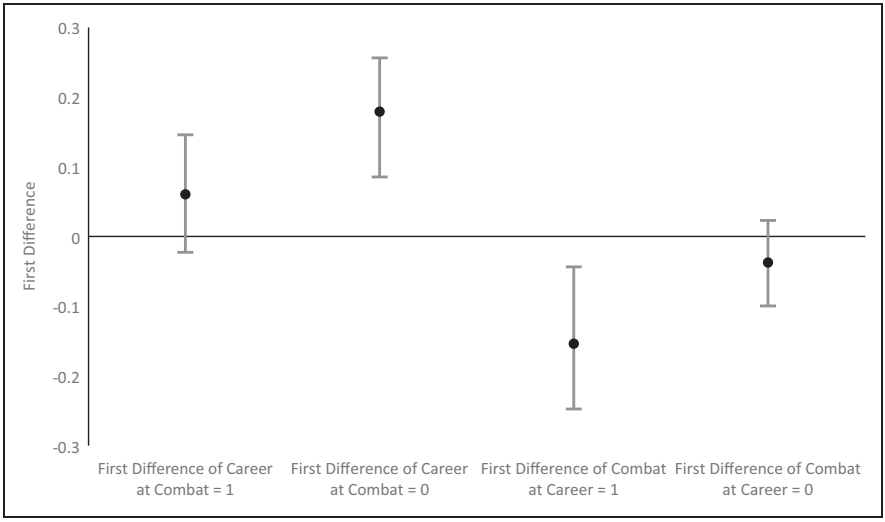


Figure 3. Marginal Effects on Militarized Dispute Reciprocation, 1869 to 2004.

available data) who could mitigate their willingness to use force. Thus, the results are broadly consistent with prior research suggesting the general aggressiveness of leaders with prior rebel experience, but not decisive (Colgan 2013; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015; Horowitz and Stam 2014).[20]

To test Hypothesis 2, we estimate a simpler logit model, with standard errors clustered by dyad, in which the dependent variable is whether the dispute initiation in question concerned a high-value issue such as territory or regime change. We switch from a conditional logit model to a standard logit model to avoid dropping observations without country-level variation from the model.

Table 3 provides mixed evidence in favor of Hypothesis 2. The interaction between *Combat* and *Career* is insignificant. However, absent the conditional relationship, those with military careers are significantly more likely to select into higher-value MIDs (i.e., MIDs that are more likely to be reciprocated), as are former rebels. Prior combat experience is also associated with a lower risk of initiating MIDs over high-value issues, providing some evidence in favor of our selection argument. These results are consistent in *t* tests as well.

There is an additional way to test whether leaders who vary on the dimensions that we outline are selecting into different disputes—that is, whether the conflict in question is a gamble or a safe bet for the initiating state.[21] In the average case, the initiator's military capability advantage could be indicative of the rashness of the initiation. It would be telling if certain leader attributes are associated with variation in capability ratios. We might then expect that more risk-averse leaders will be more likely to select into militarized disputes where the material power ratio is in their

Table 3. High-value Dispute Initiation

	(1) Model 1: 1869–2004, High-value DV β/*SE*	(2) Model 2: 1946–2004, High-value DV β/*SE*
Combat	−.183 (.157)	−.508** (.246)
Career	.473** (.214)	.557** (.232)
Combat × career	−.158 (.315)	.493 (.398)
Rebel	.488† (.130)	.433** (.188)
Constant	−1.375† (.099)	−1.424† (.134)
N	3,501	2,319
Pseudo R^2	0.017	0.034

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. DV = dependent variable, *SE* = standard error.
†$p < .10$.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

Table 4. Average Capability Ratios in Militarized Disputes, by Initiator's Leadership Attributes.

	Mean	*SE*	Difference
Rebel	**.501**	**.009**	
Nonrebel	**.570**	**.007**	**.069**
Career	**.441**	**.011**	
No career	**.576**	**.007**	**.135**
No combat and no career	**.552**	**.007**	
Combat and no career	**.676**	**.014**	**.124**
No combat and career	.423	.021	
Combat and career	.452	.012	.029

Note: Statistically significant differences are in bold. *SE* = standard error.

favor. In contrast, more risk-acceptant leaders will select into disputes even when the capability ratio does not favor them.

To assess this possibility, Table 4 presents the mean proportion of total capability of the initiator for each of our leadership attribute variables (using the data from Table 2).[22] A higher mean indicates that the material balance of power was in favor of the initiator, for example, the head of state with that particular background characteristic. We bold the statistically significant differences (in two-tailed *t* tests).

The table reveals that nonrebels and leaders without career military experience tend to have a greater military advantage when they initiate conflicts than their counterparts. While we cannot observe it directly, it would be reasonable to expect

that these leaders are more successful when they do bluff. Conversely, rebels and military careerists without combat experience tend to have smaller military advantages—or outright disadvantages—in the disputes they initiate. This is consistent with our theory and statistical results, suggesting that rebels and those with military careers but no combat experience tend to self-select into less advantageous disputes. A secondary result is that leaders with military combat experience tend to enjoy more favorable military capability ratios when they initiate disputes, compared to those with no combat experience. Even though the difference between those with military careers and combat and those with military careers but no combat is not statistically significant at the .05 level ($p = .12$), the direction is consistent with our argument. Overall, the least risk-acceptant initiators of MIDs—in terms of initiating in situations where their side holds a military advantage—are those with military combat experience, but no military career. Again, that is consistent with our overall argument that military careers tend to make leaders overly optimistic, while combat experience tempers this optimism.

These results are also robust to a number of alternative specifications available in the Online Appendix.

- We test an alternative specification of foreign policy preference similarity—the ideal point estimates based on the United Nations voting developed by Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017). While limited to the 1946 to 2004 period due to data availability, the results show that our findings are not simply due to using the sum of alliances between states to capture foreign policy similarity.
- Research by Weeks (2008; 2012) demonstrates a greater probability of reciprocation and conflict for personalist and military regimes. We therefore add variables capturing the extent to which regimes are personalist or run by the military and reestimate the models. Our findings are once again robust and are also robust to alternative ways of measuring personalist and military regimes as well.
- It is possible that focusing on unit-level heterogeneity through fixed effects on the country skews our results because it misses unmeasured factors at the dyad level that could influence the probability of dispute reciprocation. We therefore reestimate Table 2 using dyadic fixed effects instead of country fixed effects and find the same results.
- Given the potential for the results to be biased by low-level militarized disputes below the level that engage national leaders, we also rerun the models with a different dependent variable that more clearly demonstrates conflict escalation—MIDs where the target responds with the use of violent force. The results are consistent in these models as well.
- We estimate core models using an alternative measure of military service: a trichotomous measure of military service where no military service = 0; military service short of a career = 1; and a full military career = 2, and again find equivalent results.

- We estimate stripped down versions of our models, in case the interactions between too many control variables are skewing the results.
- Gibler, Miller, and Little (2017) provide a revised measure of dispute reciprocation for MIDs that challenges previous research. We replicate our core MID reciprocation model in Table 2 using their revised measure, and the results are consistent.
- Selection issues surrounding the initiation stage could bias the results. We therefore estimate selection models where the first stage was MCT or MID initiation and the second stage was reciprocation. The results showcase additional robustness for each model.
- In our theory, we do not anticipate that short periods of military service unaccompanied by combat are likely to fundamentally change the way leaders behave once in office. However, if this is incorrect, then the baseline category in our analyses would improperly mix leaders without military experience and leaders with military experience who did not see combat. To assess this possibility, we explore both a three-way interaction between any service, career, and combat and an equivalent dummy variable approach. The results confirm that short-term military service does not meaningfully impact the future behavior of leaders.

Conclusion

Arguments about how leaders influence the pace and outcome of conflicts lie at the core of critical debates within international relations. In this article, we demonstrate the importance of a new facet of these arguments—the attributes of the leaders themselves. This adds to a literature that has generally been focused on domestic politics (Fearon 1994, Schultz 1998). Our findings demonstrate that leader attributes matter when it comes to understanding the process that gives rise to threats and disputes and, by extension, the decision of the target state whether or not to reciprocate. Chief among these are the attributes most immediately connected to conflict escalation—military and combat experience. Given the prominence of leaders in the historical narratives of bargaining between states, these results are valuable in that they bridge the gap between anecdotal evidence and empirical international relations research.

These findings open the door to additional work on this question. For example, the background experiences of leaders on the receiving end of a militarized threat are also likely to be relevant. Gelpi and Griesdorf (2001), for example, argue that younger political leaders and those with shorter tenures are more likely to attract military challenges than those with more experience and longer tenures. In addition, we have only scratched the surface when it comes to potentially relevant leader attributes. To take just one example, characterizing the extent and nature of a leader's prior government service may also be a useful way of informing

expectations. George H. W. Bush's prior service as Vice President, for example, may have shaped the perceptions of allies and adversaries alike when he took over from President Reagan in 1989.

In a broader sense, this project is a step in the important ongoing process of incorporating leaders and their attributes back into the systematic analysis of international affairs. One consequence of the system-level theorizing that dominated international relations in past decades is that it pushed leader-level considerations into the background. As the findings in this article demonstrate, with the gains from system-level models largely consolidated, it is high time we brought such considerations back into the fold.

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. There are several recent exceptions, including Colgan (2013), Chiozza and Goemans (2011), Debs and Goemans (2010), Kennedy (2011), and Saunders (2011).
2. This is related to Reiter and Stam's (2002) argument that more risk-acceptant leaders launch less prudent wars.
3. Leaders and those who advise them clearly recognize this logic. It is, for example, one reason why the Central Intelligence Agency in the United States has prepared background dossiers on foreign leaders for generations.
4. For more recent work on leaders, see Horowitz and Fuhrmann (Forthcoming), Saunders (Forthcoming), Wolford and Wu (Forthcoming), and Yarhi-Milo, Kertzer, and Renshon (Forthcoming).
5. Note that this also raises questions about the leader type of the coercive target. For the sake of parsimony and clarity, we set aside this potentially important issue for future research.
6. We explain below how we code whether someone had a career in the military.
7. A skeptic of this argument might note that Betts' landmark (1977) study found that US military officers were not more likely to recommend military action or threats to the President during Cold War crises. Feaver and Gelpi (2005) likewise found that the United

States has been less prone to initiate force during periods when it had a high proportion of veterans in Congress. The argument and evidence we present here provides an important qualification to these arguments. Specifically, there may be important distinctions between the impact of the experiences of those who advise heads of states and the experiences of heads of state themselves.

8. One could also argue that any military service might give leaders more credibility in making threats. Our focus here is on those with careers, given the impact of socialization over time, and on the role of military service in influencing selection, rather than credibility. This is an interesting topic for future research, however.
9. The theoretical mechanism for this is described by Kennedy (2011) and drawn out further by Horowitz and Stam (2014). Also see Goldgeier (1994).
10. For more on issues involved in coding prior combat experience, see Horowitz and Stam (2014).
11. Additionally, that stricter definition would make it extremely difficult to code leaders who served in the Navy or Air Force of their respective countries, since pilots and naval crew members experience the risk of death, even if they are never fired upon.
12. Among the personal attribute variables, we take special care to avoid variables that are potentially posttreatment (potentially effects of the independent variables of interest). The attributes we identify are plausibly pretreatment or at least uncorrelated with our independent variables of interest.
13. These are described in detail in Downes and Sechser (2012) and for the sake of space, we do not repeat that discussion here. However, their control variables are similar to those employed by Schultz (2001). We do not use country-initiator-fixed effects due to the limited number of cases in the Militarized Compellent Threats (MCT) data set. Using fixed effects drops too many cases and thus may bias the results. In the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID)-focused results below, given that there is more variation in the dependent variable, we switch to using country-initiator-fixed effects.
14. Both of these examples are also present in the MID data that we employ in later tests.
15. As was the case in Downes and Sechser's (2012) analysis, democracy does not have a significant effect on compellent threat outcomes in these models. The consistency here lends credibility to the overall results.
16. The figures are generated using Clarify according to the insights on interpreting interaction terms from Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006) and Berry, Golden, and Milton (2012).
17. These and other robustness checks are available in the Online Appendix.
18. The Online Appendix has a table with the numerical totals for the full sample as well as the time-restricted sample.
19. This also raises the question of whether military careerists without combat experience are more likely to escalate upon reciprocation. While this is outside the scope of our theory, existing research from Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis (2015) suggests risky leaders are more likely to escalate to war as well. A challenge is trying to measure whether the trigger for escalation is leaders reacting violently to reciprocation. Neither the MCT nor MID data sets contain the event sequence data necessary to answer this, which is a limitation future research can address.

20. In the full model, the first difference for the rebel variable is .051 (the 95 percent confidence interval is [−.004, .108]). In the time-restricted model, the first difference is .051 (the 95 percent confidence interval is [−.024, .133]).
21. "Gamble" and "safe bet" here refer to a national-level perspective and do not incorporate other, domestic political factors that might influence how a leader evaluates the relative costs and benefits of conflict.
22. The results are consistent if we generate this table using the MCT data.

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