Domestic Explanations for Autocratic Conflict Onset on Territorial Disputes

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Abstract This research explores the underlying domestic factors influencing autocratic regimes' decisions to initiate conflict over territorial disputes. Specifically, the study investigates why some autocracies escalate territorial disputes into military conflicts while others refrain, despite similar external conditions. The central hypothesis posits that the level of threat posed by opposition groups, conceptualized as their unity and strategic coherence, significantly affects these decisions. Employing a logistic regression model on data from territorial disputes between 1947 and 2000, this paper introduces the novel variable "opposition level of threat," operationalized through the coordination level of opposition strategies. This study challenges conventional perspectives that focus primarily on external triggers and regime type, arguing instead that internal political dynamics play a crucial role in autocratic decision-making processes. The findings suggest that autocratic regimes are more likely to pursue militarized conflict as a diversionary tactic when facing a highly unified and threatening opposition. This research contributes to the international relations literature by highlighting the impact of domestic political threats on autocratic foreign policy decisions and provides actionable insights for policymakers engaged in diplomacy and conflict resolution with autocratic states.

Introduction

Territorial disputes often serve as a breaking point for international conflict, yet the decision to escalate such disputes into military engagements varies significantly among autocratic regimes. A striking example of this variation can be observed in the case of Argentina and its decision to invade the Malvinas Islands in 1982. This military action was initiated by the ruling military junta to assert sovereign claims but also possibly to divert the Argentinian public's attention from domestic economic and political crises. In contrast, the ongoing territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana has seen fluctuating tensions but, as of yet, has not escalated to full-scale military confrontation despite Venezuela's autocratic governance and substantial internal challenges.

Furthermore, both autocracies have been very similar in three aspects: first, in their respective times, both countries suffered from great GDP contraction; so, both autocracies were in great economic crises. Second, the economic crises did not impede both countries from heavily repressing their populations and political dissent, with some Argentinian NGOs claiming that during the time of the military junta, the Argentinian state disappeared around 30,000 people (International Commission

on Missing Persons, 2024) while in Venezuela there have been more than 19,000 extrajudicial killings (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In terms of political imprisonment, Argentina's regime held around 3,349 people, and the Venezuelan regime detained about 15,700 people across a ten-year period (Catoggio, 2010; Amnesty International, 2023). Third, neither country passed, or has passed, major reforms to its political system. In Argentina, the military junta held a firm grip on political power through the arms with no elections, while in Venezuela, the ruling party has maintained power through repression and the co-optation of major political party electoral cards, practically disqualifying them from running for office.

This empirical puzzle raises a critical question in the study of international relations: why do some autocratic states go to war over territorial disputes while others do not? The variation in autocratic decisions to go to war over a territorial dispute suggests that factors beyond mere possession of disputed territory are at play. Moreover, the existing literature on conflict onset has extensively explored the influence of regime type, national capability, and the strategic importance of territory. Similarly, there are some specific domestic drivers that existing literature has explored, such as repression and domestic unrest that propel some autocratic regimes towards aggressive military actions.

This research aims to delve into a different domestic explanation for such divergent behaviors among autocratic states in the context of territorial dispute conflict initiation. This article is based on the diversionary theory of war framework. I assume that both government and opposition groups behave strategically and rationally to seek power. By analyzing internal political dynamics between opposition coordination and government responses to challenges against incumbents, economic conditions, and the salience of the disputed territories within autocratic regimes, this study seeks to uncover the underlying factors that influence decision-making processes regarding war initiation. The cases of Argentina and Venezuela provide a comparative basis to examine how internal pressures, in terms of the opposition groups' level of threat, and regime survival strategies manifest in foreign policy decisions, particularly in the pursuit of territorial expansion as a way to divert from domestic issues.

Consequently, I argue that the presence of domestic unrest and the state's capability or its inability to repress dissent are not enough to explain why leaders make the policy choice to divert domestic attention to a war over a territorial dispute. Contrarily, an unexplored variable, such as the opposition level of threat, which I define as the level of coordination in a single strategy that opposition groups may have, determines how truly threatened the autocrats will self-perceive. I further explain this in the theory section as I incorporate theoretical implications of this new variable in conjunction with the other variables aforementioned in this article.

To test this argument, I employ a quantitative analysis approach through the use of a logistic regression model given that my dependent variable (conflict onset) has a binary nature of yes (or 1) and no (or 0). For my main independent variable – opposition level of threat – I create a novel dataset that runs from 1947 to 2000 and measures the level of unified strategies by opposition groups through a three-step

scale (low, medium, and high). The sample used in this article comprises territorial disputes from 1947 to 2000. There are a total of 348 territorial disputes in the dataset. This dataset ends in 1995; however, I extend it to include those territorial disputes until the year 2000. Lastly, the unit of analysis is dyad-year.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the current international relations literature through extending a deeper understanding of internal state mechanisms and dynamics, as well as autocratic leadership decision-making that can result in conflict initiation over territorial disputes. This not only enriches the theoretical framework of conflict studies; more specifically, the diversionary theory of war but also offers practical insights for policymakers engaged in diplomacy and conflict resolution in regions prone to territorial disputes under autocratic rule. By addressing the complexities of domestic factors influencing autocratic decision-making, this research shows the necessity for a nuanced approach in international relations and conflict prevention strategies in order to reduce conflict onset.

I divide this study into the following sections: First, I conduct a literature review where I explore the body of knowledge on conflict onset, the dynamics behind territorial disputes, autocratic regime characteristics, and opposition behavior within autocratic regimes. Second, I state my theory that addresses the previously posed research question. Third, I delve deeper into the characteristics of the research design employed in this article. Lastly, I share the theoretical contributions of this article to the body of knowledge in the international relations literature as well as the policy implications on conflict onset and how domestic factors influence foreign policy decisions.

Literature Review

There has been a constant and extensive interest from scholars regarding the study of the causes of war or explanations as to why wars occur. This is not strange given that war is the political phenomenon that takes the most lives and wreaks havoc on entire nations. Some of the works that have been produced by scholars have focused on rationalizing why war occurs through a bargaining model (Fearon, 1995; Lake, 2010). Others have delved into analyzing the distinct combinations of dyads involved in the conflict, and which types of regime initiate conflict more often than others (Wright & Diehl, 2016; Goertz & Diehl, 1992; Peceny & Butler, 2004). For example, Wright and Diehl (2016) argue that mixed regime dyads will be more likely to enter conflict given the different significance that the disputed territory may have for each regime type within the dyad, thus reducing the bargaining space. Similarly, Vasquez (1993) argues that domestic politics influence the decision of a state to go to war over a territory in terms of how much that state can mobilize its own people for (1) public support and (2) claim legitimacy and build momentum.

Other scholars, who look at domestic explanations for war, are proponents of the diversionary theory of war, where leaders that face increased domestic pressure and discontent enter into conflicts that are somewhat justifiable to divert the public's pressure away from domestic grievances and towards an external enemy (Oakes,

2012; Tir, 2010). However, there are many accounts where scholars have major disagreements in terms of quantitative evidence (Tarar, 2006; Jung, 2014; Tir, 2010; Chiozza & Goemans, 2004) that back up the theoretical claims that the diversionary theory of war provides in famous case studies, such as the Malvinas War between Argentina and the United Kingdom (Oakes, 2012).

That being said, there are some scholarly works that have attempted to find evidence in terms of this theory, which in turn has created a myriad of works that evaluate different explanatory variables such as domestic unrest (Oakes, 2012), foreign targets (Jung, 2014), government popularity (Tir, 2010), or even demonstrating leadership competence (Tarar, 2006). Some other studies go as far as contemplating the ethnic composition and military capacity of target states (Haynes, 2016; Haynes, 2017).

Diving deeper into some of the explanations, some scholars have explored the roles of repression and its relationship with regime survival and legitimation (Escribà-Folch, 2017; Lachapelle, 2022). Also, other studies have focused on the behavior of authoritarian regimes in terms of conflict initiation (Bas & Orsun, 2021; Weeks, 2012; Pickering & Kinsangani, 2010). Similarly, Altman & Lee (2022) argue that the careerist drive of some military officers functions as a motivation to initiate conflict over territorial disputes for the sake of being watched seizing territory since this bolsters their own careers as commanders. All these researchers have served as a way to address common and unanswered questions regarding conflict initiation while others have delved deeper into the domestic explanations for autocratic war onset as well as domestic explanations driving the diversionary theory of war.

Thus, an empirical gap still exists in the literature given the wide variety of explanations for diversionary war occurrence, which is sometimes supported by evidence in case studies, but at large, differing theories have found support in large-*N* empirical studies. Consequently, generating a lack of consensus among scholars. In order to address this, I argue that a key, unexplored variable might have a better explanation as to why diversionary wars occur in autocracies. This variable is the opposition level of threat; namely, opposition coordination under a single strategy with clear goals. From a rationalist perspective, when autocracies are faced with increased threat, they will have a menu with a handful of options as to how to proceed in order to survive. In the next section, I delve deeper into my theory.

Theory and Hypotheses

This paper integrates scholarly work on conflict onset in dyadic militarized interstate disputes (MIDs), autocratic regime types, and autocratic regimes' opposition movements carried out by scholars in the international relations realm. It remains true that these works have contributed in several ways to the literature; for example, some scholars have found that some dyadic combinations of states are more prone to conflict than others (Huth & Allee, 2002; Peceny & Butler, 2004; Wright & Diehl, 2016). Several others have delved into the regime type characteristics of autocracies and how political institutions shape autocratic behavior (Bernhard, 2022; Miller, 2015; Miller, 2017; McLellan, 2022). Other scholars have researched how the different domestic

actors (i.e., opposition groups and the government) act in autocracies in respect to one another (Arriola, 2009; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Helms, 2023; Ong, 2022). Moreover, this paper incorporates the theoretical framework of the diversionary theory of war from the perspective of autocratic leaders having a myriad of policy choices in order to survive (Oakes, 2012).

That being said, this theory rests on four key assumptions. First, autocratic leaders are rational actors whose primary goal is to remain in power. This survivalist maxim influences their decision-making processes, particularly when they face threats. The rational choice theory suggests that when internal pressures mount, leaders may employ strategies that can divert attention from domestic issues (Fearon, 1995; Oakes, 2012). One such strategy is the initiation of a military conflict, which can unify the public and truncate the opposition's efforts for regime change (Oakes, 2012).

Second, opposition groups in autocracies usually have a clear objective: to achieve political power through regime change or significant policy shifts (i.e., political reforms). These groups, which include political parties, civil organizations, and unions, adopt various strategies to challenge the regime. Their effectiveness and the threat they pose often depend on their ability to unite under a cohesive strategy and mobilize significant portions of the public. The stronger and more unified the opposition, the more pressing the need for the regime to find avenues to undermine this threat. A historical example of this is represented by the actions of the Multipartidaria in Argentina in the times of the military junta. The Multipartidaria was able to gather among their ranks the main five political opposition parties including the Justicialist Party (Peronist), and the Radical Civic Union (Socialdemocrats), who were the main parties, and held huge influence in the different civil organizations and labor unions that existed then. This permitted the opposition in Argentina to unify their strategy with the goal of reforming the political system, and thus, liberalize the state to permit elections.

Third, opposition groups may initially have diverse goals and methods, and a common threat from an autocratic regime can lead to a temporary alignment of interests, creating a unified front. This unity; however, it is not a given. The autocrats always have options to repress and crush dissent, or even co-opt a part of the opposition's leadership. Thus, opposition groups should not be treated as already unified, and the variation in applicable strategies in the opposition groups influences how threatened autocrats are. For example, different opposition groups in Venezuela have had a series of agreements with Maduro's regime in terms of electoral participation that has permitted them to be included in the national assembly and other policy-making bodies while other opposition groups have been heavily repressed and their leaders disqualified from running for office. Thus, one could make the argument that the repressive actions of the government not only benefit itself but also benefit some opposition parties that are looking to increase their power in respect to other opposition parties.

Fourth, the interplay between a threatened government and a unified opposition often leads to significant foreign policy decisions. When domestic stability is

threatened by a strong opposition, autocratic leaders may initiate conflicts over issues like territorial disputes. Such conflicts serve not only to distract the public from domestic grievances but also to diminish the opposition's momentum by creating a different focus for national discourse.

Thus, I claim that the opposition's capability to unify itself under a single strategy with clear goals represents a greater threat to the government than the isolated presence of domestic unrest, or the inability of the state to repress dissent due to a diminished extractive economic capacity. In order to illustrate my claim, I break down the causal chain: First, we find the presence of some domestic grievances that can have both political and economic nature. For example, in the puzzle, both Argentina in the 1980s and Venezuela in the past decade have suffered great economic contractions while also experimenting with the truncation of their political rights; in the Argentine case, due to the rise of the military junta. In the Venezuelan case, due to the authoritarian drift of the ruling party coalition in Venezuela.

Second, these grievances generate domestic unrest which can be translated into protests, violent or non-violent, and other types of activism that affect political stability within these types of regimes. It is important, though, to state a distinction between civic unrest and unrest that is guided by the political opposition. For example, a labor strike due to decreasing wages should not have the same goals as a strike with political goals behind it. Argentina is a good example of this: in 1969 student and labor movements rioted against the economic policies of the military junta. These protests, also called 'Cordobazo', despite having an underlying economic grievance, also were politically tainted due to the coordination between student and labor unions against the military government. On the contrary, Venezuela's teacher's union has been involved in the early semester of 2024 in a gremial struggle for higher wages against the government without receiving the logistical support of any other organized opposition groups. To further illustrate: the 'Cordobazo' in Argentina ended up with the military junta changing its president while the teacher's union in Venezuela had no effect. This reality can be understood in two ways: the coordination of different groups generates further pressure against the government officials, and forces them to change the policies being implemented, either by reforming the system, or even substituting the leadership, or simply to repress. Secondly, the isolated social movements that coordinate somewhat of an unrest do not truly represent a threat to the government; thus, no reform, or policy shift takes place.

Thinking about this scenario from the government's leadership perspective, state leaders will have a menu of choices to make. For example, in the case of the 'Cordobazo', the military junta had the choice of (1) keep repressing, (2) reform the political system, (3) change leadership, or (4) initiate war against the United Kingdom over the Malvinas islands. In the decision-making, they went for changing the leadership. This can be for several reasons: continuing repression could have had a contrary effect than crushing the protestors given that there were so many organizations involved. Similarly, reforming the political system was never an option given that losing power is the ultimate cost for the leadership. Waging war, for example, was

far more costly at the moment than changing leadership given that enabling such a scenario would give the leadership many more ifs than certainty. Rather, the choice of a leadership change makes sense in this case given that the figure of the presidency was sustained by a military council rather than by a personalist figure, which in itself made it easier to create a 'change' without actually changing the structure of political power.

When does, then, the policy choice to wage war become a plausible option for the autocrats? My argument is that most opposition groups need to be coordinated under one strategy. For example, the main difference between the 'Cordobazo' and the actions taken by the opposition on the eve of the Malvinas war is that the latter was comprised by opposition parties united under one common platform and, at the same time, coordinated with student and labor movements with one strategic goal: political reform to bring democracy back. If we look at this from the government's leadership perspective, the threat that the coordinated opposition is posing against you is far higher than the other isolated riots. Thus, the 'cheaper' options, such as repression, become rather difficult since the opposition groups become more in numbers, and their range of action becomes larger. Conversely, the policy options that are 'costlier' in other circumstances become much more attractive, such as waging war over a territorial dispute. Since the opposition efforts have increased, not only in numbers, but have achieved somewhat of a wide support and consensus among political forces, then waging war over a territorial dispute holds two natural utilities for the autocrats: First, it shifts the attention of the public from the domestic grievances towards an external enemy; Secondly, it gives the autocrats the advantage of imposing the political agenda due to the rally-around-the-flag effect that waging war generates. Lastly, reforming the political system is still far costlier than waging war since it represents the demise of the political elite.

In sum, I argue that autocrats will have a myriad of options in terms of what policy to enact while facing the threat of removal from office. In some scenarios, autocrats manage to contain the threats through repression while in others autocrats will shift the attention away from domestic politics towards international conflict. The 'game-changer' in this decision is dependent on how coordinated opposition groups are under one strategy, which makes them stronger vis-a-vis the autocratic regime. The outcome of this threat, thus, may lead autocrats to wage war with diversionary purposes. All this considered, I hypothesize that:

H1: *If the opposition's level of threat is higher, then autocracies will be more likely to go to war over territorial disputes.*

Research Design

This paper is studying the effect of domestic factors in autocracies' decisions to go to war over territorial disputes. To test my hypothesis, I design a quantitative study using the dyad-year as the unit of analysis. The dependent variable is conflict onset, which is defined as the initiation of militarized interstate disputes over territory within

a given year. This variable will be sourced from the Huth and Allee (2002) dataset on territorial disputes and conflict initiation that resulted in militarized interstate disputes (MIDs), which provides detailed data on militarized interstate disputes initiated by authoritarian regimes, and ranges from 1919 to 1995. I extend this dataset following the same parameters set by the authors until the year 2000. The sample includes 348 territorial disputes. In terms of the coding of the dependent variable, it will be coded 1 if there is conflict onset while it will be coded 0 if there's none. Likewise, I have established that a minimum of 100 deaths per year is the threshold to consider conflict as an observation in a given dyad-year.

For the study of binary outcome variables, logistic regression models are particularly advantageous. This model is ideal for analyzing the DV *Conflict Onset*, which is whether a conflict starts or not in a given dyad-year. Logistic regression is specifically designed to handle such binary outcomes and offers a way to interpret how changes in factors like the threat level from opposition groups affect the likelihood of conflict. Another positive aspect is that in fitting the logistic curve, logistic regression does not require residuals to be normally distributed.

Moving forward, the study presents one main independent variable: *opposition level of threat*, which I define as the level of coordination of different opposition groups under one strategy with unique goals. This variable will be coded on a scale from 1 to 3 with 1 being low level of threat, 2 being medium level of threat, and 3 being high level of threat. I will be creating a novel dataset that will gather information from a time period of 1947 to 2000. The sources for this novel dataset will be based on speeches of political opposition leaders, news pieces stating opposition coordination, and joint actions in rallies, protests, and meetings. To illustrate this I will use examples from our two case studies: the years where the Multipartidaria was created in Argentina would represent a high (3) level of opposition threat given that all five parties, and other civic organizations acted together in a unified strategy with one common goal: the end of the military junta, and the liberalization of the political system through elections. Conversely, the years where Juan Guaidó led part of the Venezuelan opposition would be coded as medium (2) since some minority opposition groups did not join his platform. Lastly, we can use the example of Argentina during the 'Cordobazo' as an example of low (1) level of opposition threat given that most national movements had varying goals that differ from each other (Seri, 2009). Furthermore, the variable *opposition level of threat* holds great theoretical importance. While authors like Oakes (2012) explore variables such as repression, and domestic unrest, *opposition level of threat* deepens our scope in terms of the domestic factors affecting conflict onset over territorial disputes. As stated in the theory section, the *opposition level of threat* poses graver challenges to the autocrats; thus, this variable holds both theoretical and empirical importance. This variable, which is purposefully built for this paper, can incentivize leadership to engage in territorial disputes to divert attention from domestic grievances or lack of support, or even rally nationalistic support. Scholars such as Weeks (2012) have also shown how internal threats can lead to aggressive foreign policy; however, the scope taken in this article deepens the explanation in a

more nuanced manner.

Similarly, I use some control variables in this study that will help reduce bias for variable selections, and accounting for confounding variables that may originate from alternative explanations. The first control is *Regime Type*, which is classified into categories such as full autocracies and electoral autocracies will be taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset; more specifically, from the additive polyarchy index that operates on a scale of 0 to 1. The index is operationalized by taking the weighted average of the indices measuring freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected executive, and suffrage. The weights are constructed so as to sum to 1 and weigh elected executive and suffrage half as much as the other three. This dataset offers a comprehensive measurement of regime characteristics and changes over time, allowing for dynamic tracking of regime evolution (Coppedge et al., 2024). I argue that incorporating this variable as a control is important due to the variation and inherent characteristics that *Regime Type* holds, and thus, the effect that it might have on autocrats' decision to go to war. The political structures set up by the system shape the decision-making of the leadership in a country, and thus, their policy choices. Previous studies have shown that *Regime Type* affects both domestic policy and international conflict behavior (Geddes, Wright & Frantz, 2014).

In addition, the second control variable is *GDP*, which serves as an indicator of economic power and capability. GDP data will be obtained from the World Bank's World Development Indicators database (The World Bank, 2012). Theoretically, countries with larger GDPs will have more resilient economies, and public grievances may not be as many as in countries with low GDP; also, higher GDP may be an indicator that a regime has increased capacities to repress domestic dissent, and thus, reduce internal threats. A third control variable is the *Salience of Territory*, which reflects the importance or value of disputed territories, and will be measured using the Territorial Salience dataset (Wright & Rider, 2014). This dataset provides insights into the historical, economic, and strategic significance of territories under dispute. If a territory is highly salient, then this may influence a state decision to go to war if the benefits from a possible victory, even partial, outweigh the costs. For example, autocrats may go to war over a territory that has high importance because it is viewed as a public good given its historical or cultural importance for a country. Victory, in this case, would most likely have an effect on domestic politics by either receiving support from the public or just using the conflict as a diversionary tactic.

Moreover, *Military Capacity*, measured by the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) from the Correlates of War Project (Chen, 2018), will also be included to control for the potential that more capable states are more likely to engage in militarized disputes. Having states that are far more capable militarily than their counterpart may be an incentive and an opportunity generator for an aggressor country in a territorial dispute. Along the same line, the study is controlling for the presence of *Formal Alliances* through the Formal Alliances Dataset from the Correlates of War Project (Gibler & Sarkees, 2004). This variable has these relevant alliance measures:

No Alliance, Only Allied to Each Other, One Side Has Outside Alliance, Both Sides Have Outside Alliances, Allied to Each Other and Outside Alliances. In the case of formal alliances, this could represent either a catalyst or an impeding factor for conflict. If the aggressor country holds key regional alliances, then it should be better positioned to attack. On the contrary, if the defender country has key alliances, then the aggressor country will show higher restraint.

Lastly, *Repression* and *Domestic Unrest* are also included as control variables given their theoretical significance. Since these variables hold a pivotal role in the diversionary theory of war, it is only natural to add them as control because they hold an alternative explanation. For repression, I will be using the Political Terror Scale dataset, which quantifies the scale and scope of political violence and repression. The scale of this dataset goes between 1 and 5 with one being countries where citizens are secure and their rights are respected. Five, on the other hand, is where the countries' population are generally and broadly terrorized by the state. Opposition is smashed, and leaders have little to no care for violent, life-threatening repression. The PTS dataset relies on information from reports from Amnesty International and the U. S. State Department (Gibney et al, 2023). Moreover, domestic unrest seeks to measure the degree of social mobilization against the government. It may be produced due to increasing discontent against enacted policies, and economic or political grievances and creates scenarios where autocrats need to make decisions of whether to repress, reform their policies, or to divert. At the same time, social unrest may shift public opinion and put autocrats in places where they need to make tough decisions, especially if they have constant, cyclical elections, where public opinion plays a major role in. Social unrest is measured through the Reported Social Unrest Index from the IMF. This index comprises reported occasions of social unrest in the media (Barrett & Bae, 2023).

Discussion and Conclusion

The theory explored in this article—linking the level of threat from domestic opposition based on their capability to unify under one strategy with clear goals to the likelihood of autocratic regimes initiating diversionary wars—has significant implications for both international relations theory and the practice of foreign policy. Firstly, this theory suggests that autocratic conflict behavior can often be understood as a strategic response to internal political dynamics rather than purely external pressures, opportunities, or even due to the failure of a bargaining process. This understanding can inform how international actors, such as foreign governments and international organizations, approach autocratic states that are experiencing significant internal opposition. For instance, international sanctions or support strategies might be applied in a way that considers the internal pressures faced by these regimes, potentially aiming to reduce the likelihood of conflict by decreasing the regime's need to divert attention from domestic issues. Conversely, deterrent policy tools such as sanctions could also be used to break down the capacity of states to wage war, or even to repress their citizens.

Secondly, the theory highlights the importance of opposition unity in influencing state behavior. This has practical implications for opposition movements within autocracies, suggesting that their level of organization and unity can not only challenge the regime domestically but also inadvertently affect the state's foreign policy decisions. For external actors supporting democratic movements, this presents a strategic dimension to consider: the support offered needs to be mindful of how it might influence the regime's stability and its consequent behavior internationally. There are many examples in the international realm of this behavior. On the one hand, Argentina ultimately decided to invade the Malvinas islands due to its utility to calm domestic turmoil, but also because it had implicit support from the U. S., their closest ally at the time. On the other hand, if the theory stated in this paper remains true, we may find the case of Venezuela with increased curiosity, where the rhetorical escalation against Guyana has increased as the opposition's drive towards a unified candidacy in the upcoming election builds up.

Conclusively, the examination of diversionary wars in autocratic regimes through the lens of domestic political threats offers a nuanced perspective on the intersection of domestic politics and international conflict. This theory supports the broader premise that internal state dynamics, particularly the strength and unity of opposition groups, play a crucial role in the process of decision-making in autocratic leaders faced with the dilemma of maintaining power. The cases of Argentina during the 1980s and Venezuela under Maduro's regime illustrate how regimes may resort to external conflicts as a mechanism to consolidate power internally when faced with significant threats from a unified opposition.

This theoretical framework not only enriches our understanding of autocratic behaviors but also serves as a critical reminder of the complexities involved in international relations and conflict studies. It underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that considers both internal political dynamics and traditional geopolitical factors when analyzing state behavior on the international stage. Moreover, it provides a different scope from major works in the study of the diversionary theory of war (Oakes, 2012) and their detractors (Schenoni, 2019) since it deepens our understanding on what factors may generate more of a threat against autocrats.

Overall, the implications of this theory are profound, urging policymakers, scholars, and international actors to consider the internal political landscape of autocracies when engaging with or analyzing these states. By acknowledging the internal drivers of conflict, international strategies can be better designed to promote stability and peace, both within and among nations.

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