

Keeping Up Appearances: The Importance of Reputation in State - Group Relations

Görünüü Kurtarmak: Devlet-Grup İlişkilerinde İtibarın Önemi

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Abstract

Over the past thirty years we observed a shift in conflict patterns where asymmetric conflicts increasingly became the norm. Building on the previous work on decision-making in asymmetric conflicts, this study compares two dominant hypotheses in the field, namely the reputation hypothesis and the capacity/interest hypothesis, regarding adversaries' conflict behavior in asymmetric conflicts. I argue that the reputation hypothesis is more useful than its bad track record in interstate conflicts suggests. I also contend that a single hypothesis is insufficient in explaining the decision-making behavior in asymmetric conflicts. In such conflicts, the uneven nature of power/status distribution between the actors leads them to have dissimilar goals and adopt different strategies. As a result, different hypotheses may be applicable to different actors. More specifically, the state as the more powerful of the two needs to protect its reputation in order to discourage any present and future challenges. The group, on the other hand, is often the weaker actor and its choices and strategies are limited by the availability of resources. This pushes them to behave according to capacity/interest hypothesis.

Key Words: Asymmetric conflict; crisis decision-making; reputation; capacity/interest

Öz

Geçtiğimiz otuz yılda çatışma modellerinde asimetrik çatışmaların giderek artan bir biçimde norm haline geldiği bir değişime şahit olduk. Bu çalışma asimetrik çatışmalarda karar alma sürecine ilişkin önceki çalışmalara dayanarak, tarafların çatışma davranışlarını alandaki iki egemen görüşü, yani itibar hipotezi ve kapasite/çıkar hipotezini karşılaştırarak ele almaktadır. İtibar hipotezinin, devletlerarası çatışmalarda, geçmişteki kötü performansından daha faydalı olduğunu ileri sürerken, asimetrik çatışmalarda karar alma sürecinin açıklanmasında tek bir hipotezin yeterli olmayacağı görüşündeyim. Bu tür çatışmalarda aktörler arasında güç ve statü dağılımındaki olağan eşitsizlik, onların farklı hedeflere sahip olmasına ve farklı stratejileri benimsemesine neden olmuştur. Sonuç olarak, farklı aktörlere farklı hipotezler uygulanabilir. Özellikle, taraflardan daha güçlü olan devlet, halihazırdaki ve gelecek tehditlere karşı itibarını korumayı hedefler. Öte yandan, karşı grup genellikle daha zayıf olan taraftır ve tercih ve stratejileri erişebildiği kaynaklar ile sınırlanmıştır. Bu durum onların kapasite/çıkar hipotezine göre hareket etmeye itmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Asimetrik çatışma, krizlerde karar alma, itibar, kapasite/çıkar

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Introduction

Conflict studies play an important role in political science. The type of conflicts studied during any given time varies greatly depending on the period and what we observe around us. This makes conflict studies one of the more diverse sub-fields in political science. Despite this variety, there are certain aspects that are common in all conflicts regardless of the actors involved or the scale.

As a process, conflict offers us three main stages: initiation, escalation, and resolution. Domestic and international conflicts alike move through these three stages. Transitions from one stage to another require actors involved to make a choice and each transition represents an attempt by one of the parties to change the *status quo*. As one side tries to change the existing relationship in its favor, the other, at the very least, tries to maintain the existing balance. This means, in order to understand conflicts, one needs a good understanding of decision-making processes.

Any shift from one stage to another is the result of either changes in circumstances through third parties or choices by the actors involved. As a result, actors' decision-making practices are an important part of conflict studies. Crescenzi and Enterline¹ make a distinction between two approaches adopted by existing studies. The first group focuses on the "stimulus-response" process we often see arms races and game theory literature, as well as studies focusing on the dynamics of interstate cooperation and conflict. Such studies date all the way back to Richardson's "Arms and Insecurity" (1960).² Crescenzi and Enterline's (2001) second approach developed parallel to this first group of studies, but instead of focusing on the interaction during a single crisis, looked at recurrent crises between two actors. Their main purpose was to determine the likelihood of subsequent militarized conflicts³ the link between reputation and behavior in subsequent crises⁴ and bargaining⁵. Evaluating both approaches, Crescenzi and Enterline⁶ concluded that conflict between

- 1 Mark J. C. Crescenzi and Andrew J. Enterline, "Time Remembered: A Dynamic Model of Interstate Interaction," *International Studies Quarterly*, XLV/3, September 2001, p.p. 410-411.
- 2 L. F. Richardson. 1960. *Arms and Insecurity*. Pittsburgh, PA: Boxwood Press (from Crescenzi and Enterline 2001).
- 3 P. Diehl. 1992. What Are They Fighting For? The Importance of Issues in International Conflict Research, *Journal of Peace Research* 29: 333-344; P. Hensel. 1994. One Thing Leads to Another: Recurrent Militarized Disputes in Latin America, 1816-1986, *Journal of Peace Research* 31: 281-298
- 4 R. Leng and H. Wheeler. 1979. Influence Strategies, Success, and War, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 22:655-684; R. Leng and S. Walker. 1982. Crisis Bargaining: Confrontation, Coercion, and Reciprocity, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 26: 571-591; R. Leng. 1983. When Will They Ever Learn: Coercive Bargaining in Coercive Crises, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27: 379-419
- 5 C. Gelpi. 1997. Crime and Punishment: The Role of Norms in Crisis Bargaining, *American Political Science Review* 91: 339-360 (from Crescenzi and Enterline 2001).
- 6 Crescenzi and Enterline, 2001, op.cit., p. 411.

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states is a time-dependent process. This time dependency shows itself in the short run in the interaction between states as they react to each other's moves. In the long run, it results in recurrent crises between states. What these studies found about international conflicts can, to a very large extent, be applied to domestic conflicts as well as other sub-fields of conflict studies.

Here, I am interested in asymmetric conflicts where the general principles of conflict apply, especially the main stages of the conflict process. In order to explain what makes an actor decide to initiate, escalate, deescalate, or resolve a conflict; the international relations literature predominantly relies on one of two hypotheses. These are the reputation hypothesis and the capacity/interest hypothesis. Simply put, the former argues that actors make their decision based on their opponent's past behavior and that if an actor enjoys a tough reputation, others will be less likely to challenge it; while the latter argues that the decision between conflict and accommodation is based on the relative capabilities and interests of the actors involved.

In reality it is rarely a clear-cut choice between the two. Most actors either choose which approach to adopt based on the crisis they find themselves in, or employ a combination of the two. On the one hand, any concerns about the other side's past behavior is likely to be taken into consideration when relative capacities and interests are calculated, on the other hand, actors are highly unlikely to risk violent conflict when they have no chance of succeeding or no interest. What I am interested in, like many other studies in the past, is which one of these two hypotheses actors tend to adopt as their main guiding principle without ignoring the impact the other may have on their decisions. A large portion of the existing studies on these two hypotheses comes from the international relations literature. Most of them find that the reputation hypothesis fails the tests, meaning actors care more about the salience of the issue and their own probability of success; than their opponent's track record⁷. Walter⁸, however, adopts a different view and argues that in cases where stakes are sufficiently high, the reputation hypothesis performs much better. She (Walter, 2003) claims that when actors stand much to lose in the future, they tend to try avoiding challenges by building a tough reputation. This argument is based on the study of territorial disputes and considering the risks a state faces in such conflicts, this conditional faith appears to be well placed. Building on this, I argue that the actors' preferred hypothesis may change according to their relative position in the conflict, as well as the stakes involved.

7 Daryl G. Press, "Power, Reputation, and Assessments of Credibility During the Cuban Missile Crisis", 97th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 2001, Boston.

8 Barbara F. Walter, "Building Reputation: Why Governments Fight Some Separatists but Not Others," *American Journal of Political Science*, L/2, 2006, p. 315.

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Consistent with the overall shift of attention toward lower scale conflicts on the field we started to see an increasing number of studies that focused on these hypotheses that aimed to explain actors' decision-making during domestic conflicts. Especially in asymmetric conflicts, where one deals with two different types of actors and different stakes for each, it would be unrealistic to assume both actors would act with the same motivation and employ similar decision-making models.

Most of the existing studies focused on territorial conflicts involving separatist movements. Since these conflicts involve a high probability of violence and are at the high end of the domestic conflict scale, it is natural that they receive more attention. While Walter's (2003) focus on territorial conflicts is an excellent example for this differentiation based on issue salience. I believe that issue salience is only one of the dimensions and that identity, or relative position in crisis, is the main factor leading actors to adopt different priorities and behavior models.

I look at conflict as a whole, without making a distinction between different levels or stages. A large majority of territorial conflicts do not start as such, but escalate to that level after certain demands are ignored or repressed. It makes sense for actors to adopt a relatively stable approach to these issues and use the same decision-making models at various stages of the same conflict. I agree with Walter (2003) that the reputation hypothesis' perceived failure in international relations does not reflect a weakness as an explanatory tool. I disagree, however, that the key is the issue salience. I contend that, while issues matter greatly, even in territorial conflicts one of the parties would have incentive to avoid reputation hypothesis. This contention is based on the argument that in domestic conflicts that involve the state are asymmetric in nature and between two different types of actors that play different roles. This, I argue, leads them to have varying priorities and different approaches.

This study contends that because the actors' relative status is the main determining factor, there needs to be a distinction between interstate and intrastate conflicts. While the power/interest hypothesis may be a better fit for conflicts between actors with equal status, the reputation hypothesis certainly has its uses in intrastate conflicts. In order to show this, I will first look at the characteristics of asymmetric conflicts and then evaluate how each hypothesis matches with the needs of the actors in them.

Decision-Making During Asymmetric Conflicts: Reputation Versus Power/Interest Hypotheses

Decision-making is different during conflicts than peace time policy making. This requires different processes that are determined by the circumstances, as well as decision-makers' approach to the conflict. A conflict is essentially

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a bargaining process with escalated stakes and a higher probability of escalation. As Morrow stated⁹, bargaining is “a form of communication” during which “parties communicate tacitly through the exchange of threats, bluffs and concessions.” During a conflict, both sides do their best to attain their goals through non-violent means and bargaining openly or through signals is the method they use. The use of violence is often the last resort because the results are uncertain and the method is costly. This, however, does not mean that the threat to use force or even the show of force cannot be used. There are two requirements for these signals to be believable and threats to be credible. First, the actor must have the capacity to carry out its threats. Second, and equally important, is the will to back these threats up. These two requirements coincide with the two main hypotheses on actor behavior during conflicts. Power-interest hypothesis looks at the actors’ capacity by measuring their ability to deliver on their threats as well as whether it is in their best interest to do so. Reputation hypothesis, on the other hand, deals with actors’ resolve.

While trying to determine each other’s capacity and resolve, actors usually have limited tools available to them. Even though they may be able to calculate their own capacity and resolve with relative ease and precision, making similar judgments about the other side often proves to be problematic. With only limited information available, one can only estimate what the other side can or will do. Another difficulty is to accurately signal one’s capacity and resolve. This uncertainty is what makes bargaining possible. In their pursuit to achieve the best outcome during a given conflict, actors base their decision-making process on one of these two models.

In a symmetrical conflict where actors share relatively equal power and status, participants will have to look for advantages over each other and plan their moves accordingly. At the same time, as a result of status parity, they will determine their behavior according to similar parameters, making it possible to explain such interactions using a single hypothesis. Asymmetrical conflicts, on the other hand, bring together units with different capacities and concerns.

9 James D. Morrow, “Capabilities, Uncertainty, and Resolve: A Limited Information Model of Crisis Bargaining,” *American Journal of Political Science*, XXXIII/4, November 1989, p. 941. with war and its costs starting if the target’s counteroffer is rejected. The equilibrium of the model falls into four different cases. These four cases are analyzed to determine how the sides communicate through their offers and how the costs of war, initial beliefs, misperceptions, and distribution of capabilities drive the probabilities of a crisis and war. The model demonstrates a joint selection bias-misspecification problem in empirical studies of crises arising from the unobservable nature of beliefs. Several empirical studies of crisis bargaining are discussed in the light of this methodological problem, new patterns of evidence are found that support the presence of the selection problem, and their conclusions are reexamined.,”DOI:”10/btxg5k”,ISSN:”0092-5853”,shortTitle:”Capabilities, Uncertainty, and Resolve”,author:”{”family:”Morrow”,given:”James D.”}”,issued:”{”date-parts:”[[”1989”]]}”},schema:”https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”}

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As a result, it is likely that each actor will base its decision on different parameters. I contend that in asymmetrical conflicts while the state bases its strategy on the reputation hypothesis in fear of further challenges to its authority, the sub-state actor bases its decision to challenge the central authority on their relative power and interest. The reason for this distinction is the significant difference in capacity. While the state is usually strong enough to deal with a challenge to its authority, if the number of challenges increases, they may pose a serious threat to its existence. Therefore, the state needs to handle the first challenge in a way that will discourage further attempts. The group, on the other hand, has relatively limited means and risks its existence by challenging the state who possesses sovereignty rights over the country and in most cases is the legitimate authority. Before taking such an action, the group needs to evaluate its chances accurately and not initiate/escalate a conflict it cannot win.

Reputation Hypothesis:

Studies that look at reputation and its impact on international relations have been around for a very long time.¹⁰ In one of the early works on the topic Schelling (1956) argues that states should act according to reputational concerns, making their past behavior central to current crises they are in because it will not only determine others' expectations from them, but also the credibility of their commitments. As a result, while determining policy, states will have to take into consideration not just the conflict they are in, but also the conflicts they may be involved in the future. This increases the value of building a tough reputation by increasing the potential future costs of concession.

More recently, studies on the role of reputation attempted to answer two main questions¹¹: how do states process the information they receive from international relations when they are not directly involved; and what decision-

¹⁰ From Crescenzi (2007:384); Jervis, R. (1976). *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Dixon, W.J. (1983). Measuring Interstate Affect. *American Journal of Political Science*, 27 (4): 828-851; Leng, R.J. (1983). When Will They Ever Learn? Coercive Bargaining in Recurrent Crises. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 27 (3): 379-419; Leng, R.J. (1988). Crisis Learning Games. *American Political Science Review*, 82 (1): 179-194; Huth, P. (1988). *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; Maoz, Z. (1990). *National Choices and International Processes*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Snyder, J. (1991). *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press; Levy, J. (1994). Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield. *International Organization*, 48 (2): 279-312; Maoz, Z. (1996). *Domestic Source of Global Change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Mercer, J. (1996). *Reputation and International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Reiter, D. (1996). *Crucible of Beliefs: Learning, Alliances, and World Wars*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Farkas, A. (1998). *State Learning and International Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Leng, R.J. (2000). *Bargaining and Learning in Recurring Crises: The Soviet-American, Egyptian-Israeli, and Indo-Pakistani Rivalries*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Press 2005.

¹¹ Mark J. C. Crescenzi, "Reputation and Interstate Conflict," *American Journal of Political Science*, LI/2, April 2007, p. 383.

makers do with this processed information. There are three distinct approaches for the latter question. The first is an experimental model of direct learning that looks at how actors in a conflict learn from each other's behavior and base their own future policies on this information.¹² Second, is the rivalry literature that views dyads as evolutionary political arenas, giving us a longer time span that evaluates the long term developments in a conflict.¹³ This makes it possible for us to see how actors adjust their behavior according to their past experiences with the same opponent. Finally, a model of historical learning that also includes other actors.¹⁴ This last approach gives us the advantage of looking at the relationship between dyads without excluding external actors that may have an impact on the conflict.

It is important for us to include outside actors because conflicts do not take place in a vacuum. The efforts to include the system in dyadic conflicts goes back to Richardson's (1960) study of arms races where he developed a model that can capture N-states.¹⁵ Even though its scope was limited to arms races, the model based on the interaction of N-states proved to be useful for research that followed. Another example was the study of war diffusion where studies looked at how once it starts war tends to pull in other nations.¹⁶ A similar tendency is also visible in conflict and crises. These two examples cover the two audiences that reputation building targets. The first is others in that system that may become involved in the conflict or may initiate similar conflicts in the future. This represents the diffusion potential of conflicts. More directly, an actor builds a tough reputation in order to deter its opponent during a conflict from escalating it, or making similar demands in the future. This represents the time dimension and leads us to focus on recurrent conflicts. Both of these audiences are important because the actors I am interested in exist in relatively stable systems where there is a limited number of actors with

- 12 From Crescenzi (2007: 383): Leng, R.J. (1983). When Will They Ever Learn? Coercive Bargaining in Recurrent Crises. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 27 (3): 379-419; Leng, R.J. (1988). Crisis Learning Games. *American Political Science Review*, 82 (1): 179-194; Leng, R.J. (2000). *Bargaining and Learning in Recurring Crises: The Soviet-American, Egyptian-Israeli, and Indo-Pakistani Rivalries*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- 13 From Crescenzi (2007: 383): Diehl, P.F. and Goertz, G. (2001). *War and Peace in International Rivalry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- 14 From Crescenzi (2007: 383): Crescenzi, M.J.C. and Enterline, A.J. (2001). Time Remembered: A Dynamic Model of Interstate Interaction. *International Studies Quarterly*, 4 (4): 409-431.
- 15 From Crescenzi (2007: 383): Richardson, L.F. (1960). *Arms and Insecurity*. Chicago: Quadrangle.
- 16 From Crescenzi (2007): Houweling, H. and Siccama, J. (1985). The Epidemiology of War, 1816-1980. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 10 (4): 641-663; Kadera, K.M. (1998). Transmission, Barriers, and Constraints: A Dynamic Model of the Spread of War. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42 (3): 367-388; Levy, J. (1982). The Contagion of Great Power War Behavior: An Analysis of the Great Powers, 1495-1975. *American Journal of Political Science*, 26 (3): 562-584; Most, B. and Starr, H. (1989). *Inquiry, Logic and International Politics*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press; Siverson, R and Starr, H. (1991). *The Diffusion of War: A Study of Opportunity and Willingness*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

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long lifespans that are forced to interact with each other. These interactions not only determine actors' view of each other, but also are remembered for a very long period of time. These characteristics of these systems make recurrent conflicts literature important for the purposes of this study.

Looking at interstate conflicts, Crescenzi and Enterline¹⁷ list four main dimensions of recurrent conflicts between two states that determine the nature of the conflict. The first of these dimensions is "accumulation," meaning that if the two states regularly interact with each other, their relationship can be considered well defined and that further interaction can only have a marginal effect on it. The second dimension is "temporal distance" between interactions. If the interactions are relatively frequent, they can be considered as parts of the same event. Third is the "degree." Here they distinguish between different types of interaction varying between verbal threats and military clashes. Finally, the "rate of change," that interaction does not cease to exist after the last event, but that its impact only gradually diminishes.

As I mentioned in the previous section, one of the factors determining the outcome of a conflict is the participants' resolve. Information on an actor's resolve allows others to estimate how far they will be willing to escalate the conflict. In a given conflict, all actors, regardless of their relative role, must pay attention to the other side's resolve. Unfortunately, conflicts do not take place in a perfect information setting. Not only actors do not possess all the information they need to make healthy decisions, the environment they interact in is also filled with uncertainty. Under such circumstances, the interpretation of signals becomes crucial. In addition to signals, another major source of information is the other side's past behavior. This has two dimensions to it: the personality of decision-makers and the issue salience.

The personality of the decision-makers and the decision-making procedures of a country help us predict current conflict behavior with past experiences where the same people were involved. Similarly, issue salience also looks at the past. Actors need to know how much importance others attribute to an issue in order to determine how much they may be willing to compromise.

The bargaining process is an interaction between actors where each side attempts to interpret the other side's intentions and gain an advantage. To be successful in an uncertain environment will be based on the credibility of the threats and promises. An actor's credibility is defined as the "perceived likelihood that it will carry out its threats and promises".¹⁸ As the definition implies, this is not an objective measure. Instead, it is entirely based on the

17 Crescenzi and Enterline, 2001, op.cit., p.p. 414-415

18 Press,2001, op.cit., p. 3.

perception of the other actor, shaped by the information available to them. Among the factors contributing to an actor's credibility is its reputation, which can be defined as "the perception, held by others, of the state's pattern of past behavior"¹⁹. Meaning, we can guess what an actor will do, based on what it has done in the past where past behavior is seen as an important source of information actors have motive to remain consistent in their approach to issues. In other words, the reputation they build today will help determine how they will be perceived in the future. According to reputation hypothesis, actors earn their reputation by consistently keeping its promises and carrying out its threats²⁰. Once an actor earns a reputation for being credible, their threats and promises will carry more weight than one that did not fulfill its commitments in the past. There are a number of different versions of the hypothesis in the literature, but a simple categorization, is between narrow and broad versions²¹.

The broad version of the reputation hypothesis is based on two assumptions: consistency across time and issues. This consistency comes from the belief that foreign policy tends to be stable over the long run, based on either slow or unchanging national interests. When foreign policy is determined according to a stable set of interests, it becomes reasonable to expect states to pursue stable policies and maintain a certain type of behavior for a relatively long period of time. This implies that policies will remain the same even after leadership changes and gives reputation a long shelf life once it is established.

Unfortunately, there are two problems with this assumption. First, the national interest does not consist of a set of unchanging goals and preferences. Especially in a fast changing international system states find themselves having to constantly change and adjust their goals. As a result, it becomes quite hard to talk of interest stability over the long run. Second, and as a result of a more recent trend, we see the decline of the separation between domestic and international politics. If not before, today it became completely unrealistic to expect that these two fields of policy can remain separate from each other. In the past we have experienced states maintain stable foreign policies despite the changes they experienced in their domestic politics. Changes in foreign policy tended to be the result of changes in international circumstances. This might have been because there was greater consensus among the public when it came to international relations, because foreign policy decisions were less likely to affect people's daily lives. Clearly, this is no longer the case. The boundary between domestic and international politics is increasingly blurring and foreign policy issues are being used to draw up support in domestic politics. In this environment changes and policy go hand in hand with changes in how national interest is defined.

19 Press, 2001, Ibid.

20 Press, 2001, op.cit., p. 7.

21 Press, 2001, Ibid.

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The assumption of issue consistency also represents a challenge. Where we cannot even predict that an issue will remain important for an actor in the long run, it seems highly unlikely that they will perceive all issues they are involved in as being equally important. Even though, issues that may pose an existential threat to a country are likely to provoke similar reactions regardless of the decision-makers in power or the circumstances, a minor trade dispute is unlikely to be viewed as equally important as a major border dispute.

Overall, the broad version of the reputation hypothesis leads us to expect a very high level of consistency from actors. The level of consistency appears to be related to the level of certainty in the international system where certainty brings stability. For example, in bipolar systems where the system is frozen at a balance between two blocks, lower levels of uncertainty make it somewhat easier for states to maintain stability. Hegemonic structures are also relatively stable especially when the power preponderance is relatively high. Dynamic systems like multipolar structures or transitioning systems represent constantly changing circumstances and force actors to deal with them. In addition, they also provide individual actors with more freedom to deal with issues as they see fit. As a result, maintaining long term stability becomes a challenge. Where there is no stability, assumptions regarding reputation's longevity, usefulness, and fungibility ceases to be realistic.

The narrow version of the hypothesis, on the other hand, claims a much more limited impact for reputation in conflicts. It also contends that an actor's reputation has a limited shelf life, meaning that past behavior only has an impact on future conflicts for a limited period of time and that this period is relatively short. The scope is also limited when it comes to issues. The hypothesis claims that actors may have different reputations on different issue areas. For example, an actor may be tough on territorial conflicts and weak when it comes to economic issues. This, to a large extent, depends on the availability of tools in that specific policy area, as well as the actor's vulnerability. Because of this variation, in order to determine others' reputation we need to look at past conflicts that involve similar issues and stakes.

According to Press' (2001) definition of the narrow reputation hypothesis, the limitations placed on the impact of a state's reputation include five dimensions. First is geography, where an actor's actions in one region determines its reputation in that region alone. This is the result of two variables. One is the actor's reach. Very few actors in the international system have the capacity to effectively reach various parts of the world. Majority of actors in the system have much more limited capacity and reach. This limits their ability to carry out threats and keep promises. In addition, each region has different actors and power structures, making it hard to treat them as equal to each other. The second is the interest. Different parts of the world possess different

characteristics that cannot be equally salient to an actor's interests. As the interests, actors, and abilities vary, the issue of reputation fungibility becomes more complicated.

Second limitation is time. The reputation gained by an action does not last forever. Its impact is actually quite limited based on two factors. The first is the longevity of the decision-makers. Because decision-makers have the power to alter policy according to their beliefs and views, when people in these positions change certain shifts in policy is expected. New decision-makers, even if they support similar positions to their predecessors, cannot benefit from the reputation built by them. Wolford (2012) studies reputation in relation with leadership changes and finds that these changes influences preferences and create shifts in policy. The second factor is the policy environment. A changing international system requires decision-makers to make constant changes and adjustments. This means that priorities and interests can change at a relatively fast pace, shortening the time period one can enjoy the benefits of its reputation.

Third is the issue type. Each actor is involved in a number of different issues simultaneously. Because these issues cannot all be equally salient, some will have to be prioritized. Just like the issue type, stakes of the conflict are also important to decision-makers. As some issues will be seen as vital, others will be more open to compromise. Related to this third point is the fourth, the stakes. Actor behavior will depend on what they stand to gain or lose from the interaction. As a result, it is reasonable to expect actors to be firmer on a position when the stakes are high, where they stand to win or lose a lot. It may be a waste of time and resources to build a reputation for toughness when the stakes are low.

Another limitation is the identity of the actors involved in the conflict. Often the expectation is that reputation will have a greater importance on repeated crises between the same actors. Rivalries allow participants to accumulate information about their opponents and the ability to build a tough reputation may prove to be useful in future crises.

Finally, who occupies the leadership positions matter because reputation can only be effective if both sides have the same leaders as the last time they came into conflict with each other. Introduction of a new leader forces the other side to reevaluate its position and creates uncertainty about the power structure between opponents. This, in turn, depending on that actor's decision-making practices makes formerly built reputations less useful. Because an actor's perceived reputation in a given conflict will rely on a combination of these factors, the narrow version becomes significantly more complicated than the broad version. On the one hand, making it more realistic, but at the same time much harder to quantify and measure.

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There is a number of studies that questioned the validity of the reputation hypothesis. Clare and Danilovic²² classify these studies under two main approaches: socio-psychological and rationalist. The socio-psychological approach evaluates the role preexisting images of the enemy play on how we evaluate their current signals. It argues that the decisions are based on subjective beliefs. The rationalist approach focuses on the role of interest in decision-making. It is unclear, however, how much we can separate interest from reputation and whether we can argue that actors pursue a tough reputation regardless of what issues are at stake. This makes it necessary to adopt a new approach to reputation that is not limited to temporal domain. That is also Clare and Danilovic's (2012) conclusion. They find that reputation is only effective depending on the stakes involved. Other studies by Fearon (1997) and Smith (1996, 1998) argue that studies that find some support for the reputation hypothesis often suffer from selection effects. Their arguments are based on the fact that crises do not occur randomly and that countries that displayed a lack of resolve in the past are more likely to be targeted by others.

Much of the literature on the reputation hypothesis looks at inter-state conflicts, many focusing on territorial disputes where the stakes are higher. For example, Crescenzi and Enterline (2001) find that past interstate interactions is a good determinant of current behavior. Here, I am interested in asymmetric conflicts that take place between a state and a group that are not only predominantly domestic, but may or may not escalate to territorial conflict level. One important difference that emerges is that despite the change in the stability of foreign policies in the long run, one can still argue that countries' foreign policies are more stable and predictable than governments' domestic policies. Many countries still follow stable foreign policies with clearly defined positions over issues. As mentioned earlier, this relative clarity reduces uncertainty and allows reputation to be effective for a longer period of time, especially if the decision-makers remain the same and the issue is perceived as sufficiently salient. Some like territorial issues can even be immune to leadership changes.

In domestic conflicts, many of the criteria posed by the narrow version of the hypothesis become even more significant. For example, leadership changes are likely to lead to more major policy changes in domestic politics. Because governments have more leeway, issue salience also becomes more important. Governments' ability to stay in power depends more heavily on how they address public preferences in domestic politics.

Even though the structure of interstate system appears to be more supportive of actors adopting a tough reputation as a tool of foreign policy dur-

22 Joe Clare and Vesna Danilovic, "Reputation for Resolve, Interests, and Conflict," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, XXIX/1, February 2012, p. 6. no. 1 (February 1, 2012)

ing conflicts and crises, the evidence appears limited mainly coming from the territorial disputed literature. I contend that the reputation hypothesis, especially its narrow version, may be better fit for a specific type of conflict, namely asymmetric conflicts. Especially when we look at these conflicts from the point of view of the state maintaining a reputation becomes more important. Unlike states that have relatively wide interests in the international arena, actors in domestic politics struggle in a narrower geographic area over a smaller number of issues most of which are interrelated, meaning that reputation in domestic conflicts should be more fungible than in inter-state conflicts. Secondly, domestic politics is often more open to change than a state's foreign policy, because decision-makers can change positions at a lower cost than in foreign policy. This, in turn, may lead to potentially drastic changes in an actor's reputation. Especially considering that in domestic conflicts where the central state is the dominant actor, as well as one of the sides to the conflict, it will have an incentive and the means to adopt a reputation-building approach in order to avoid future and escalating challenges. Due to these characteristics, reputation hypothesis represents a useful model of decision-making for a certain type of actor in these conflicts. More specifically, the more powerful actor, often the state, can use a tough reputation in interlinked conflicts in order to deter challenges to its authority and position.

Power/Interest Hypothesis:

Another approach to decision-making during conflicts and crises is the power/interest hypothesis (Press, 2001). It argues that rational actors determine their response during an ongoing conflict based on the relative capacity of the adversaries as well as the salience of the issue at stake for them. According to this view an actor's credibility does not depend on its past behavior, but on "the current balance of power and interests"²³. Power/interest emphasized opportunity over long term expectations from reputation. When actors believe that the existing circumstances in the conflict are in their favor, they will be more likely to escalate or adopt a tough stance in order to take advantage of this imbalance. The same actor may shift its position when conditions no longer favors it.

Under power/interest hypothesis, in order to determine a threat's credibility, one needs to focus not on their opponent's past behavior, but its capability to carry the threat out, but also suffer a low, and more importantly, acceptable cost while doing it. Power/interest hypothesis essentially has its roots in the rational actor model and the source of the nationalist critique of the reputation hypothesis. Reputation is seen as one of the factors that influence calculations, but not necessarily on of the more important ones. Ac-

23 Press, 2001, op.cit, p. 10.

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tors are believed to take into consideration a number of factors among which power levels and interests are the most important in order to provide a point of reference.²⁴

This hypothesis bases the decision between accommodation and aggression on the expected benefits and costs of each action. Because in the international system relative power distribution is more stable in the short term and actors are equal in status, making these calculations accurately becomes somewhat easier. The problem is the availability of reliable information. Because actors lack the perfect, or even near perfect, information, the results may not be as accurate as they require. Domestic actors, on the other hand, may lack the short term stability, but make up for it in the availability of information. The level of information domestic actors have about each other is often more reliable and sufficient to evaluate each other.

In asymmetric conflicts, where the status and/or power distribution is uneven and the system within which the interaction takes place is relatively limited, the disproportionate distribution of power and status makes it easier for the stronger side to make decisions because the power preponderance makes a certain degree of miscalculation tolerable. For the weaker actor, on the other hand, the balance of power is a much bigger concern. Not only because it clearly is the under-dog, but also because it stands more to lose, the weaker actor has to make its challenge at a point of time when the conditions favor its success. In case of failure the group is likely to suffer more than they currently do and their ability to mount another challenge in the near future will be seriously crippled.

Press (2005) argues that at least during crises actors only pay limited attention to reputation and their common history and instead focus on the crisis at hand. To some extent this is understandable because crises place additional constraints over decision-makers. Similarly, Arreguín-Toft (2001) contends that an alternative approach by arguing that the interaction between actors' strategic choices is a much better determinant of conflict outcomes. This means that actors need to determine their strategy according to the other side's choices. It rejects the idea that strategy is based on the actor's own characteristics.

When actors involved in a conflict are similar in status, the way they approach decision-making, as well as what they prioritize will be somewhat similar. This similarity will lead them to use the similar hypotheses guide their behavior. In asymmetric conflicts, however, there are significant differences

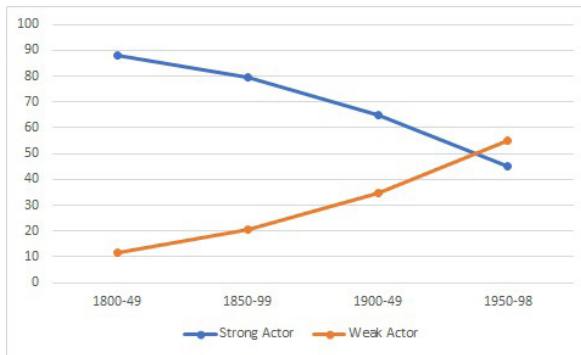
24 Some examples of these studies (from Walter 2003): Maxwell 1968; Jervis 1970; George and Smoke 1974; Goertz and Diehl 1992; Huth 1996; Bartkus 1999; Diehl 1999; Press 2001; Toft 2003.

between actors. The most important of these is their status. Uneven status impacts the methods and tools available to each side. It also influences the way they perceive future risks involved with their current choices. Because of this, the paper argues, actors with different capabilities and concerns will look at the conflict from different perspectives and are likely to adopt varying approaches to decision-making. This, I argue, leaves us with a dual structure where each participant's behavior needs to be analyzed and predicted according to a different approach.

Asymmetric Conflicts and Actor Behavior

A conflict is considered to be asymmetric when there is significant discrepancy between the actors. This discrepancy may be the result of actors' power, status, or methods available to them. A study of past asymmetric wars shows us that, despite the advantage they enjoy, stronger actors lost about thirty percent of these conflicts with a frequency that has been increasing²⁵. Even though Arreguin-Toft's data ends in 1998, the trend appears strong enough to assume it continues to be the case. Common sense suggests that in an asymmetry, especially if one of its dimensions is power, the strong actor will have an advantage over the weak.

Graph-I: Percentage of conflicts won by the strong and weak actors in asymmetric conflicts over time (Source: Arreguin-Toft, 2001)



There are various explanations for this trend. Mack's (1975) study is one of the earlier efforts. He argues that the reason why weak actors tend to win conflicts is interest asymmetry, meaning that the more powerful actors have a lower interest in winning because their survival does not depend on the result of these conflicts. Unlike their weaker counterparts, if stronger actors lose

25 Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, XXVI/1, July 2001, p. 96.

these conflicts all they have to do is to make some compromises. While this may be the case in some conflicts interest asymmetry does not appear to be sufficient by itself in explaining why weak actors are disproportionately successful. Arreguin-Toft²⁶ criticizes Mack's (1975) explanation along the same lines and on two grounds. First, and possibly most importantly, he argues that relative power is a poor predictor of relative interest or the choice between war and peace. He emphasized the presence and importance of external factors in determining actor performance. His second objection is about the definition of success. Mack's explanation looks at the time span of the conflict and concludes that if the weak does not lose the conflict in a presupposed time period, it is successful. However, the theory does not tell us anything about why some asymmetric conflicts last longer than others. It is possible that the reason is not the success of the weaker actor, but other factors such as the involvement of third parties to slow down the conflict, or the level of priority the stronger actor gives to the conflict. These apparent weaknesses make it necessary to improve Mack's (1975) argument. Among other things, political vulnerability is an important factor. Not all stronger actors have low political vulnerability. If today's concessions open the door for future demands from other weak actors, it becomes harder to argue that the strong have less invested in the conflict and can afford to lose.

Arreguin-Toft (1998) presents an alternative explanation that relies on strategic interaction in order to explain the outcomes of asymmetric conflicts. Strategy is defined as an "actor's plan for using armed forces to achieve military or political objectives"²⁷. Two dominant strategy options are assumed for each actor: direct attack and barbarism (for the strong); direct defense and guerrilla warfare (for the weak)²⁸. He concludes that when both actors adopt similar strategies (direct or indirect) the strong is more likely to succeed, while if they use mismatched strategies, the weaker side will have a greater advantage. Here, what becomes important is the asymmetry of strategy which benefits the weak actor.

Similarly, a high proportion of the literature on asymmetric conflicts consists of military studies where the asymmetry comes from actors using different methods. As these studies and others show, there are different dimensions of asymmetry. I adopt a broader definition of asymmetry where the uneven status of the actors is the source and where differences in power and strategy stems from it. The main reason behind this choice is that I am interested in more than the military dimension, but the whole conflict process. Strength matters because it not only determines the outcome but also

26 Arreguin-Toft, op.cit., p.p. 98-99.

27 Arreguin-Toft, op.cit., p. 99.

28 Arreguin-Toft, op.cit., p. 100.

the strategy and the decision-making process. Status, on the other hand, will determine not only the methods available to an actor and limitations on its choices, but also how each actor is likely to be threatened by third parties. It helps others figure out whether an actor's struggle is legitimate or not.

I contend that because, unlike symmetric conflicts, asymmetric conflicts bring together different types of actors, a single approach to decision-making is often insufficient. The major actor is often the state. It is not only the more powerful side, but also the one whose legitimacy as an actor is recognized by domestic as well as international actors. As a result, the state possesses the advantage of power as well as status. While it gives the state an important advantage in the conflict, this legitimacy also comes with limitations. As a member of the international community, the state is bound by its rules. These rules limit state behavior and the methods available to it in dealing with a challenge. The violation of the established rules and norms may lead to sanctions by other states and/or international organizations.

Especially when a state faces "multiple strategic rivals and having failed in past disputes," it "has an incentive to invest in its reputation for resolute behavior by initiating and escalating conflicts"²⁹. Clare and Danilovic (2010) adopt a different point of view and look for the source of the state's motivation in the challenger's reputation. In other words, whether a state decides to build up a reputation as a tool for general and immediate deterrence depends on its challenger's reputation. They argue we need to focus on "the impact of a state's reputation on its willingness to initiate conflicts (proactive reputation building)"³⁰.

The other side of these conflicts is a group that may be based on ideology, ethnicity, culture among other dimensions of identity. The methods available to these groups offer a wide variety ranging from peaceful protest to terrorism or guerrilla warfare. Relative to the state, the group often has more limited means. The limitation of the means makes these groups more dependent on the support from the outside, whether domestic or international. In order to receive this support, the group must prove the legitimacy of its cause to these audiences. Despite these disadvantages groups also enjoy an advantage over their more powerful adversary. This is the flexibility they have when it comes to methods they can employ. Mechanisms to regulate group behavior are almost non-existent and mostly rely on the availability of support. Often some of the more violent methods are justified based on the group's disadvantage in size and means.

29 Joe Clare and Vesna Danilovic, "Multiple Audiences and Reputation Building in International Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, LIV/6, December 2010, p. 860.

30 Clare and Danilovic, *op.cit.*, p. 861.

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In addition to these, another important difference these two sides have is the way they perceive the conflict. For the group, the state is the only major actor it needs to challenge in order to achieve its goals. Even though the stakes are high and the struggle is often perceived as existential having a single actor to contend with brings the conflict a certain degree of simplicity. The state, on the other hand, needs to adopt a wider perspective because the group that is currently challenging it is only one of the long list of potential challengers. While none of these challengers may not be able to pose a serious threat, their combined potential may be a major threat. This difference, more than any other, is at the root of different decision-making choices.

The characteristics that differ the dynamics of these intrastate conflicts from inter-state conflicts to which these two hypotheses are often applied to can be evaluated in three main categories. First is the balance of power between two sides. These are asymmetrical conflicts. It is extremely rare that the group that challenges the state possesses equal power. States have sovereignty rights that allow them to behave relatively freely within their own borders, shielding them to an extent from outside interventions. Instead of openly fighting a group, a state can adopt policies that will lead to similar results without attracting reaction from the outside world. This provides states with various tools that challenging groups do not have at their disposal. Naturally, actors with significantly different means, have different priorities, and determine their strategy according to different criteria.

A second difference is the level of information they have about each other. As a result of living in the same country, actors have a much better idea on each other's interests and capabilities. It is also easier for them to communicate through direct and indirect means. The familiarity is also likely to reduce the chance that signals may be misinterpreted. The state knows when a group may pose a threat and how many other challenges may rise. Meanwhile, the group can more accurately estimate the capacity and domestic support the central government enjoys. From the state's point of view, the only way of developing credibility becomes actions because the probability of successfully bluffing diminishes in an environment where information is more attainable.

And finally, even though different groups may advance different demands, it is relatively clear to everybody where the process may eventually lead to. Regardless of what they start with, when they believe they can achieve it, most groups prefer either separation or a major change in the system. The knowledge that not only demands can escalate over time, but also spread to other groups is a major source of concern for the state, because accommodation may not always solve the conflict but lead to its escalation, lowering the possibility that a state will accommodate.

During a domestic asymmetric conflict, the state faces demands from one of the groups in the country. Regardless of the extent of these demands the state faces a dilemma. On the one hand, the accommodation of these demands may solve the conflict, or at least prevent it from escalating further. On the other hand, state's willingness to accommodate may be interpreted as a sign of weakness or an unwillingness to engage in conflict. This, in turn, may open the way for further demands and/or similar demands from other groups. At the other extreme, is repression, or non-compliance, where the state ignores group demands, risking an escalation of the conflict. In reality, the choice is rarely between pure accommodation and repression. States often adopt a position in between. As Walter³¹ points out, "the logic of the reputation theory implies that a government will not only care about the number of additional challengers, but also the cumulative value of land that may come under dispute in the future and the relative strength of these additional groups. When the demands (issues at conflict) are taken in a continuum, challenges from ethnic groups present a major threat for the central authority." The way to avoid this is building a reputation for toughness in order to deter future challenges to its authority. A reputation for toughness implies that the state, instead of accommodating, will choose to escalate the conflict using repression and/or violence raising the stakes not only for the present challenger but for all future potential challengers. As the reputation hypothesis explains, in order to be perceived as tough, the states must consistently refuse accommodation on similar demands. This consistency is important to achieve the desired result. Even if the state is powerful enough to deal with the present challenge, its position makes it vulnerable to challenges from a relatively large number of challengers. This makes it necessary for them to have a long term view that goes beyond short term power/interest calculations.

On the other side of these conflicts, actors have a different view of the conflict. Just like state actors, it is reasonable to expect groups to behave in a rational manner based on the information available to them. The stakes for these groups are relatively high. With limited resources and a disadvantage when it comes to their status, they need to take advantage of opportunities. As a result, they tend to take these risks when either there is a realistic chance of success, or they have no other choice. This requires them to pay close attention to opportunities that may arise from the balance of power. Naturally, they prefer to achieve their goals through peaceful means at as low a cost as possible. A peaceful resolution allows them to keep their already limited resources to be put to better use and does not require to risk the group's very existence. If at some point it becomes clear that a peaceful resolution is outside reach, the group needs to make a decision regarding the future of the conflict.

31 Walter, 2003, Ibid.

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They either accept the status quo and at least temporarily withdraw their challenge or they choose to escalate the conflict through violent means. Their decision depends on two pieces of information. First, they have to evaluate their capacity relative to the power of the state meaning that the timing of a challenge is crucial. In order to be successful, the group makes its challenge when the state's power and resolve are declining, or when its own power is increasing. They also take into consideration international support and circumstances. The second piece of information is the salience of the demand they will make. If the circumstances the group is in are worse than what they perceive as acceptable; the group may be more willing to take risks, a better off group would not. Desperation may lead the group to act even if they lack the means to succeed. These two pieces of information are more or less sufficient for the group to make its decision on whether to act or wait for a better opportunity. This decision-making process is consistent with what the power/interest hypothesis predicts. This is not to claim that groups have no use for building a reputation, but the reputation they need to build is of a different kind. The group uses reputation in order to build legitimacy and attract support to its cause. While it may be useful to have a tough reputation in order to extract resources from the population, even this represents certain risks because this may open the way for the state's use of force against them.

Looking at these conflicts from the state's point of view Walter (2006) presents two key findings. First, she shows that states that adopt the reputation hypothesis as a guide in territorial conflicts are less likely to face further separatist challenges.³² In addition, she shows that in cases where governments chose accommodation, the type of accommodation also matters in determining the frequency and the type of future challenges.³³ Throughout this study, I emphasized that territorial conflicts are not just a type of conflict, but when it comes to certain challengers, it is a stage of conflict. As a result, while I believe the argument, I represent here is applicable to all state-group conflicts, a more realistic claim is to limit it to ethnic conflicts. In that sense this study expands the argument's applicability. In addition, while the scope of her study was limited to conflicts over territory that had already escalated as far as they could, Walter's (2006) results are encouraging and require further study.

This study represents two major improvements on Walter's. First, unlike Walter, I do not solely focus on separatist claims. I argue that separatist claims represent a final stage in a conflict that start with smaller demands and esca-

32 Governments that did not accommodate demands or offered limited reforms faced further challenges only 27% of the time, while the ones that accommodated faced such demands 59% of the time (Walter 2006, 324).

33 On average, countries that offered no territorial autonomy faced .78 subsequent challenges, countries that awarded territorial autonomy faced 1.05 subsequent challenges, and countries that granted full independence faced 2.0 additional challenges (Walter 2006, p. 324).

lated over time. Groups usually demand separation under two circumstances; when they have already achieved everything else; and when they believe there is no possibility, they can achieve their lesser demands under existing circumstances. In either one of these cases the conflict starts long before the issue of separation surfaces and what actors did in earlier stages matter regarding what happens at this stage. The second improvement this study represents is the dual structure, where we treat actors' decision-making differently, in the hope that this will provide us with a more accurate views of the conflict.

Conclusion

Asymmetric conflict is a sub-category of conflict studies which includes a great variety of different types, involving different actors. What sets apart asymmetric conflicts from others is that they bring together actors with different status and power levels. This is an important distinction because it determines how we should approach these conflicts, especially when it comes to decision-making. While most decision-making theories are applicable to this sub-field, the way we use them needs to be reevaluated.

Because asymmetric conflicts are between two different types of actors that have very little in common than the issue at stake, they look at the conflict through significantly different lenses and should not be treated as the same in our analyses. Such conflicts often take place between a state and a group where not only the two sides have different power and status, but different concerns and priorities as well. That is why I propose a two-pronged approach that will evaluate actors' decision-making using different tools.

As I have argued above, the state, being the more powerful side, has less at stake on the present conflict and often can afford to accommodate certain demands without risking its existence. On the other hand, the state also faces a relatively large number of potential challengers. While a single challenge is usually not a major cause for concern, the combination of these potential challenges usually is. The accommodation of group demands is likely to open the door for further demands from a higher number of challengers. This leads states to adopt a long term view and care about how they are perceived by others. Consequently, they attempt to build a reputation for toughness to deter any future challengers.

The conflict presents higher stakes for a group because not only their ability to mount a challenge is limited, but also the cost of failure may be very high. If they succeed their demands are fulfilled and the need for a future challenge becomes minimal, but failure may pose an existential threat in addition to crippling their ability to mount a second challenge. As a result, they have very little use for reputation building, but instead must focus on the short term outcome and maximizing their chances of success.

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Based on this, I argued that asymmetric conflicts require us to apply different decision-making approaches to the two sides of the conflict. I focused on the two most commonly used hypotheses in the field, namely the reputation hypothesis and the power/interest hypothesis. I attempted to show that while it makes sense for states to adopt a long term view and base their decisions on the reputation hypothesis, groups should be more focused on the short term results and determine policy according to the power/interest hypothesis.

As a theoretical piece this study is a starting point. It aims to establish a framework on which future research can be based on. The logical next step is to look at a number of case studies in order to determine if the argument presented here holds on specific cases. That would be followed by a model that would allow us to test the argument more thoroughly using a larger sample, giving us a tool to better evaluate asymmetric conflicts.

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