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# Is it cohesion or diversion? Domestic instability and the use of force in international crises

**Cigdem V. Sirin**

## **Abstract**

This study asserts that cohesionary – rather than diversionary – motives primarily influence the propensity of political leaders to use external force in international crises in times of domestic turmoil. Specifically, I contend that mass violence leads political leaders to engage in cohesionary tactics to achieve and maintain social order in their country for political survival. Employing random effects probit analyses with International Crisis Behavior (ICB) data for 139 countries from 1918 to 2005, I find that increased mass violence is more likely than other forms of domestic problems (be it an economic downturn or government instability) to instigate the external use of force during international crises. I also find that the impact of mass violence on the external use of force is contingent on ethno-religious heterogeneity and regime type.

## **Keywords**

diversionary theory, domestic instability, mass violence, use of force

## **Introduction**

The core argument of diversionary theory is that political leaders generally resort to foreign conflict when faced with domestic problems in order to distract the public's attention. Despite its intuitive appeal, scholars have challenged its theoretical propositions, methodology, and findings. Many critics have noted the inconsistency surrounding the empirical results of diversionary studies. Critics also note that scholars who examine diversionary conflict have focused mostly on democracies and particularly on the United States, which is in fact an outlier due to its unique capacity to project its power worldwide (Oneal and Tir, 2006).

Given that leaders use different strategies in response to particular types of domestic strife, this study asserts that the specific source of instability in a country (be it economic downturn, government instability, and/or mass violence) determines the incentives and utility for using force in international crises. More specifically, I argue that different forms of domestic instability instigate

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distinct policy incentives, which may not be diversionary in nature. Moreover, I expect that mass violence is more likely to lead to the use of force than other forms of domestic problems because it invokes an urgent need for cohesion on the part of decision makers who seek to achieve or regain social order within their country for political survival. I also expect that the cohesionary<sup>1</sup> impact of mass violence is conditional upon the level of ethno-religious diversity as well as the regime type of a country. To extend the validity and generalizability of the findings beyond the United States and other democracies, this study empirically examines the international crisis behavior of 139 countries from 1918 to 2005.<sup>2</sup>

## Diversionsary theory

Diversionsary theory argues that domestic turmoil prompts leaders to initiate conflict abroad in order to divert attention from internal problems. Diversionsary theory has attracted a large amount of scholarly interest, resulting in a proliferation of studies on the linkage between domestic instability and external conflict (e.g. Andreski, 1980; Clark, 2003; Davies, 2002; DeRouen, 1995; Gelpi, 1997; Levy and Vakili, 1992: 118–46; Miller, 1995; Morgan and Bickers, 1992; Oneal and Tir, 2006; Pickering and Kisangani, 2005; Russett, 1987, 1990; Sobek, 2007). Considering the current state of the literature on diversionsary theory, this area of research scores high regarding the diversity of issues covered as well as the number of propositions and datasets generated. Scholars have employed a large variety of methodologies, including formal models, simultaneous equations modeling, hazard analyses, and detailed case studies (Sprecher and DeRouen, 2002).

At the same time, however, the diversity of approaches partly accounts for the lack of consensus regarding the optimum theoretical framework and methodology. Consequently, research on diversionsary conflict has thus far generated inconclusive findings. Indeed, although several studies find evidence of diversionsary behavior among political leaders (see, e.g., Gelpi, 1997; Lebow, 1981; Levy and Vakili, 1992: 118–46; Ostrom and Job, 1986; Rosecrance, 1963), others show no support for the propositions of diversionsary theory (see, among others, Leeds and Davis, 1997; Miller, 1995; Morgan and Anderson, 1999; Stohl, 1980: 297–330).

Given the limited empirical support for the notion that leaders generally resort to diversionsary tactics when faced with domestic problems, and in search of a more specified theory, several scholars have suggested that the dynamics of the politically motivated external use of force operate differently for democratic and non-democratic states. Until recently, the focus of diversionsary literature has remained on democracies. On the other hand, studies that have examined the conflict behavior of different regime types with different measures of domestic turmoil have produced mixed findings.

Andreski (1980) argues that autocratic regimes are less likely to use force abroad in response to domestic problems because their military forces tend to be geared towards internal control. Similarly, Gelpi (1997) finds that democratic states are more likely to pursue diversionsary foreign policies when faced with domestic turmoil, since they are less able than authoritarian regimes to employ mass repression (see also Davies, 2002). Conversely, Miller (1995) argues that authoritarian governments are more likely to use military force to divert attention from internal problems than democratic governments because they generally lack the policy tools to address domestic problems and are less vulnerable to the potential costs of external aggression. Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (1992) also suggest that democratic leaders anticipate higher domestic political costs for using force than do non-democratic leaders.

Regarding government instability and political insecurity, Pickering and Kisangani's (2005) study illustrates a positive relationship between elite unrest and military intervention for both autocracies and democracies. Nevertheless, as elite dissent grows severe, the likelihood of sending troops abroad diminishes. Lai and Slater (2006), on the other hand, suggest that given the unpredictability of succession procedures in most authoritarian settings and the prospect of an unceremonious (or at worst violent) removal from power, the primary incentive to stay in power is more often greater for authoritarian leaders than for democratic leaders. Authoritarian leaders (particularly those of military regimes) are thus more likely to behave belligerently in the international arena in order to secure domestic loyalty and bolster their legitimacy.

Regarding socio-political unrest and mass violence, Russett (1987) argues that for non-democratic states, interstate dispute participation is strongly related to two forms of domestic unrest: protest and rebellion. Domestic strife will threaten authoritarian regimes because it will have a negative effect on the economic performance of the state and on the capability of the state to extract resources from the population (see also Levy and Vakili, 1992: 118–46; Morgan and Bickers, 1992). On the other hand, Pickering and Kisangani (2005) assert that the public has little influence on authoritarian leaders, as the masses have little ability to instigate a regime change other than by revolutionary means. Since mass unrest rarely represents a legitimate threat to their power, autocrats are seldom compelled to use diversionary force to quiet it. In contrast, leaders in democracies have more incentives for diversionary tactics in the face of mass unrest given their vulnerability as elected officials within a democratic system (but see Chiozza and Goemans, 2003).

Regarding an economic downturn, diversionary theory predicts an increase in a leader's propensity to use external force to divert attention from economic problems. Nonetheless, Leeds and Davis's (1997) analysis of democracies suggests that there is no significant relationship between deteriorating economic conditions and the use of militarized force (see also Lian and Oneal, 1993; Meernik and Waterman, 1996). As DeRouen (1995) argues, this may be attributable to an executive's decision to concentrate on the economy rather than on the use of force. However, Oneal and Tir (2006) find evidence that a bad economy increases the likelihood that a democracy, but not an autocracy, will initiate a fatal dispute. In contrast, Russett (1990: 123–140) finds that non-democratic states tend to be more conflict prone under favorable economic conditions (see also Pickering and Kisangani, 2005).

In short, the empirical findings in this area of research remain inconclusive. Given the disagreements and problems in this area of research, scholars have criticized diversionary theory on various fronts. For instance, Meernik and Waterman (1996) question the very core of diversionary theory by asking whether diversionary tactics can have an effect on a public already aware of a stagnant economy. Tarar (2006) challenges the appropriateness of the term 'diversionary' by suggesting that leaders may use an aggressive foreign policy in order to bring alternative evidence to bear on the public's evaluation of their competence, rather than trying to get the public to forget about a bad economy. Another criticism is that potential target states strategically avoid conflict with states that are experiencing domestic problems and are thus more likely to employ diversionary tactics, which leaves little room for the implementation of the diversionary use of force even if diversionary incentives exist (e.g. Clark, 2003; Smith, 1996).

## Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Despite the advances in the literature on diversionary conflict, there remain some important unanswered questions regarding the theoretical construct of a leader's decision-making incentives

for engaging in a conflict. Namely, scholars have not recognized that creating a foreign policy crisis to boost popular support and/or temporarily distract attention from domestic problems in the short run is not the same as attempting to manipulate group identities via an external conflict in order to increase social cohesion in the long term to deal with severe social unrest. Given that leaders may use different strategies in response to particular types of domestic strife (see Gelpi, 1997), I argue that the specific source of instability in a country (be it economic downturn, government instability, and/or mass violence) determines the incentives and utility for using force in international crises. More specifically, I assert that different forms of domestic instability instigate distinct policy incentives, which may not be diversionary in nature.

The idea that leaders may use force to divert attention away from domestic problems stems from the research on in-group/out-group theory. This theory suggests that conflict with the out-group increases the cohesion and political centralization of the in-group.<sup>3</sup> Group leaders are aware of such a cohesive effect and act calculatingly to create or maintain external conflict for serving their internal objectives (see Simmel, 1955). Therefore, the original in-group/out-group theory suggests that the main objective of a group leader for resorting to a conflict with the out-group is cohesionary, not diversionary. Neglecting this important theoretical distinction, diversionary theory relies on unrealistic assumptions about the ability of political leaders to divert attention, which would require a highly inattentive and credulous public. Accordingly, I consider cohesionary incentives to be theoretically more likely than diversionary goals to capture the domestic turmoil–external use of force linkage. To explore this possibility, I investigate the internal dynamics that may instigate such cohesionary incentives to use force in international crises.

I argue that the prevalence of mass violence, in a society is likely to generate an urgent need on the part of political leaders to create a sense of cohesiveness in order to achieve and sustain order in a country for the purpose of political survival. Davies (2002: 675) points out that when widespread domestic strife and dissatisfaction paralyze the state, decision makers expect that their chances of survival are small. Decision makers have to consider their options in response to certain domestic challenges such as large-scale riots and/or demonstrations. If granting the demands of the demonstrators requires too high a political price, such as the breakdown of the regime, or if the elite are incapable of suppressing mass unrest, then decision makers will turn to other tactics. The use of force constitutes one such tactic that political leaders may resort to during international crises in the presence of increased mass violence, with the anticipation that an external conflict will generate internal cohesion.

An illustrative historical case where a country with increased mass violence responded to an international crisis by use of force is Turkey's 1974 military intervention in Cyprus. Turkey in the late 1960s and 1970s went through a period of political fractionalization, radicalization, and extreme violence between left- and right-wing sections of the society, which paralyzed Turkish politics. This wave of social unrest marked by violent street demonstrations, labor strikes, bombings, political kidnappings, and assassinations eventually led the military to take charge of the government in a coup on 12 March 1971. In 1973, democratic elections were reinstated, officially ending two years of military rule. Under the threat of another military coup or violent revolution, the democratically elected government that emerged was desperate to redress the anarchical situation in Turkey and achieve some sense of national cohesion. The opportunity arose when a Greek-sponsored coup occurred on the island of Cyprus, which had been a major topic of public interest in Turkey due to its significant Turkish-Cypriot minority population.

As Adamson (2001: 285) puts it, the Turkish government felt an 'overwhelming pressure to draw on popular nationalist sentiment and to use the Cyprus crisis as a means of maintaining

national unity and remaining in power.’ Consequently, Turkey took military action in Cyprus in July 1974, announcing its objective as the protection of the Turkish minority on the island. Observers of the Cyprus intervention described it as highly successful in instigating a heightened sense of national unity in the country across political, social-economic, and cultural lines. Indeed, as noted in a Turkish newspaper, ‘disagreements between workers, villagers, youths, strikers, and all groups were removed’ (Gumusbas, 1974, cited in Adamson, 2001: 289). In the American press, the Turkish public reaction to the Cyprus intervention was described as follows: ‘men and women along the highway cheered the troops, blowing kisses and handing slices of watermelon to the soldiers whenever the convoys stopped . . . Nearly all shops and many homes were displaying Turkey’s flag, red with a crescent and star’ (*The New York Times*, 22 July 1974, cited in Adamson, 2001: 289). Additionally, then prime-minister Bulent Ecevit, in his speech on 20 July 1974 to the Turkish National Assembly, depicted the military intervention in Cyprus as a victory for democracy and national unity:

Some people maintain that, in times of crisis, only a dictatorial regime can unite the entire nation in the national cause. They are under the impression that such unity cannot be achieved under a democratic government because of the wide divergences of opinion and freedom of discussion and association that democracy tolerates. This is contrary to the truth as proved by current events. (Adamson, 2001: 290–1)

The difference between a cohesionary use of force and a diversionary one is that the primary objective of an external use of force implemented with cohesionary incentives is *solving* the domestic problem at hand, rather than *diverting* attention away from it. That said, even though cohesion and diversion are distinct theoretical concepts, one should recognize that political leaders might have both cohesionary and diversionary motives for resorting to the external use of force in the presence of domestic problems. In other words, cohesionary and diversionary objectives are not mutually exclusive. Thus, even if a political leader’s key objective in using external force may be to increase national cohesion under conditions of severe domestic unrest, it makes sense that one may also practically wish to divert the public’s attention from such domestic problems. In that case, rather than seeking an exclusive motive behind use of force behavior, the main research question for this study is as follows: ‘What is the *primary* motive (among others) of political leaders for resorting to the external use of force under conditions of domestic unrest – cohesion or diversion?’

Specifically, when a country suffers from increased mass violence, a leader may choose to use external force with the anticipation that such foreign policy action will increase national solidarity and consequently (although indirectly) solve the problem of mass violence.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, an economic downturn or government instability will not necessarily generate incentives for the cohesionary use of force, since increasing national solidarity does not typically constitute a possible solution for dealing with such domestic problems. In sum, exploring the cohesionary incentives of political leaders and examining mass violence as a causal factor presents a more plausible route to untangling the relationship between domestic instability and the use of force in international crises (see DeRouen and Goldfinch, 2005). These considerations lead to my baseline hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* A country’s likelihood of using external force in an international crisis increases in the presence of an increased level of mass violence within its borders.

There exists a consensus among scholars that external conflict increases internal cohesion and political centralization. That said, most scholars note that the level of cohesion in a group achieved by an external conflict also depends on certain conditions pertaining to the nature of the group and

the nature of the external conflict (see Coser, 1956; Stein, 1976). Among these necessary preconditions (which act as intervening variables), the most important factors that scholars propose are (1) the presence of a degree of group consensus (solidarity) pre-dating the external conflict, and (2) a given group's perception of the external conflict as a severe threat.

Regarding the nature of the external conflict, Coser (1956) – who sought to systematize and qualify Simmel's (1955) original in-group/out-group argument – differentiates between violent and non-violent conflict by arguing that only violent conflict generates a sense of a serious threat to a given group and thereby increases cohesion. Taking into account this qualification, I focus on international crises that involve violent military acts.

To capture the role of pre-existing group solidarity, I take into consideration whether a given country is made up of a heterogeneous society with ethno-religious divisions. Many scholars suggest that civil violence seems to break out more frequently in countries with multiple ethnic, linguistic, or religious groups (e.g. Ellingsen, 2000; Vanhanen, 1999). I expect that one's attachment to the nation as a whole (rather than to his or her sub-national ethnic group) is likely to be weaker in a country that is composed of ethnically diverse groups compared with a country that is ethnically more homogenous. This is because sub-national group affiliations in an ethnically plural society may inhibit the potential for developing strong overall group identity affiliations at the national level. Consequently, given an identity divided between national and ethno-religious attachments, external conflict is less likely to elicit as much cohesionary power in a plural society as it is in a more homogenous one. In such cases, the political leader of an ethnically divided country may have less incentives to resort to cohesionary external conflict and may thus choose to deal with ongoing mass violence through other policy means such as the suppression of violent groups or the co-opting of opposition groups (see Bueno de Mesquita, 1980: 361–98; Richards et al., 1993). On the other hand, I expect that a political leader of a homogenous society has more incentives to engage in external conflict in the presence of increased social unrest. This occurs because the presence of minimum divisions beyond an existing group identity at the national level makes external conflict a viable venture for increasing cohesion and, therefore, stopping ongoing mass violence. These considerations lead to the following hypothesis on the effect of mass violence, which is conditional upon the level of ethno-religious heterogeneity in a country:

*Hypothesis 2:* Countries with lower levels of ethno-religious heterogeneity are more likely to use external force in an international crisis in the presence of an increased level of mass violence within their borders.

Nevertheless, even in the presence of ethnic and religious divisions in a country, a sense of national identity may persist, especially if the defining characteristics and membership rules of such national identity go beyond ethno-religious attributes (as in the case of the United States). This brings us to the difference between civic and ethnic nationalism. Civic nationalism concerns one's membership and loyalty to a state in terms of citizenship, common laws, and political participation regardless of ethnicity and lineage (Brown, 2000; Ipperciel, 2007). Ethnic nationalism, in contrast, defines an individual's membership in and loyalty to a nation-state in terms of ethnicity and lineage; hence, individuals belonging to different ethnicities, even if they reside in and are citizens of a state, cannot become part of the dominant national group (Alter, 1994; Ignatieff, 1993; Smith, 1991).

In the case of ethnic nationalism, there already exists a strong sense of cohesion among the dominant group and little interest in extending the cohesion to domestic out-groups (see Shulman, 2002). In such instances, options for dealing with rising mass violence are likely to exclude cohesionary policy acts, since pre-existing ethnic nationalist group solidarity often produces a 'ceiling

effect', which limits the cohesionary influence that the external use of force may have for curbing mass violence. On the other hand, civic nationalism often fails to be the sole (or at least primary) basis for group identification and falls short of evoking strong emotional attachment to the nation. As Shulman (2002: 580) puts it:

most civic components of nationhood are external to the individual, whereas ethnic and cultural components are internal. Territory, political institutions and rights, and citizenship exist outside the individual, whereas ancestry, race, religion, language, and traditions are a part of a person's physical and psychological makeup. As a result, the intensity of attachment to communities founded predominantly on the latter will likely exceed those founded predominantly on the former.

When one considers regime type differences from the theoretical framework of cohesionary incentives, democracies are more likely than autocracies to promote a civic (rather than ethnic) nationalist identity (Habermas, 1996; Ipperciel, 2007; Kymlicka, 2001). Under conditions of increased mass violence, therefore, the incentives for democratic leaders to attempt to increase national cohesion through external conflict should be stronger. Accordingly, in terms of regime differences on the cohesionary use of force, I hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 3a:* Democracies are likely to use external force in an international crisis in the presence of an increased level of mass violence within their borders.

*Hypothesis 3b:* In contrast to democracies, autocracies are unlikely to use external force in an international crisis in the presence of an increased level of mass violence within their borders.

As a separate note, a dominant perception in the diversionary literature is that different factors of domestic instability are interchangeable with one another such that selecting one of them is a matter of conceptual taste and analytical convenience (but see, e.g., Pickering and Kisangani, 2005; Russett, 1990, 123–40). However, if different sources of domestic disturbance generate different policy incentives, the measures of domestic problems may not always act as proxies or alternatives to each other. In that sense, it would be better to incorporate these different measures simultaneously in an analytical model to control for and compare their distinctive impact on the propensity for leaders to use external force.

## Data and research design

For empirical testing of my hypotheses, I employ data from the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) Project that covers 139 countries from 1918 to 2005. The ICB dataset is unique in the sense that it provides data on international crises and different forms of domestic problems (i.e. social, economic, and political) for a broad range of countries within a long time span. The ICB project allows one to examine the data on two different levels: actor level and system level. The variables that I use in my analyses are from the actor-level ICB dataset, with the exception of the variable 'contiguity', which I adopt from the system-level dataset. I exclude all the intra-war crises within this period to avoid confounding the results, given that such crises have already escalated to violence and war (see Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 2000; DeRouen and Sprecher, 2004).

I employ a monadic analysis because the theoretical focus of this project centers on whether and how specific sources of instability in a country determine the incentives and utility of that country for using force in international crises. Specifically, I am testing whether particular sources of



domestic strife have an independent effect on a state's international crisis behavior rather than whether certain characteristics of the target state will influence the behavior of that state. Thus, the research question at hand requires a monadic test. Accordingly, the analytical models used here are not designed to elucidate strategic interactions between crisis actors, such as whether democracies or autocracies tend to use force against states with similar or different political systems in international crises or whether likely targets may strategically avoid violent conflict with states experiencing domestic instability. I do, however, introduce several control variables into my models to account for certain international environmental characteristics (such as power discrepancy) and crisis-specific factors (such as crisis trigger) that have been shown to affect a state's likelihood of using force in an international crisis.<sup>5</sup>

### *Dependent variable*

*External use of force.* The ICB 'major response' variable identifies the specific action a state takes after it perceives a threat from an event or act that triggers a crisis. This variable ranges across nine categories, from no action to violent military action. Since the focus of my analysis is the use of force, I determine the cut-off criterion for the dependent variable as violent versus non-violent acts. I collapse the variable into a dichotomous measure by coding the events that involve violent military action where the crisis actor resorts to the use of force (ICB categories 8–9; e.g. invasion of air space, border clash, etc.) as '1' and '0' otherwise (ICB categories 1–7; e.g. no response, verbal acts such as protest, economic acts such as embargo, etc.).

### *Major independent variables*

*Mass violence.* This variable assesses the level of violence within the society of the crisis actor as evidenced by insurrections, civil war, and revolution. The ICB dataset uses a code of '1' if there is a significant increase in the level of domestic violence during the relevant period preceding the crisis, a code of '2' if the level is normal, and a code of '3' if there is a significant decrease. I collapse the ICB variable into a dichotomous variable and code it as '1' if there is a significant increase in the level of mass violence and '0' otherwise. In this way, I obtain a more direct measure to test my hypotheses. Last, the ICB dataset uses a code of '4' if the crisis actor is a newly independent state. I exclude the observations of this category from the analysis for this variable (as well as for the measures of economic downturn and government instability), since such cases do not provide information on the level of the domestic problem under investigation.

*Economic downturn.* This variable assesses the overall state of the economy for the crisis actor during the period preceding a crisis. I base this measure on the ICB variable labeled 'economic status of actor', which provides a summary indicator of the cost of living, unemployment, food prices, labor disruption, and consumer goods shortages. Since there is a considerable amount of missing data for a number of individual economic indicators, this composite index takes advantage of the available partial information, and thus enables a more parsimonious model. The data are examined from the year of the crisis to the fourth preceding year. The ICB dataset has the values coded as '1' if there is an increase in economic problems, '2' if the economic situation is normal, and '3' if there is a decrease in economic problems. For a more direct measure of worsening economic conditions, I generate a dichotomous variable and code the cases where there is a significant increase in economic problems as '1' and '0' otherwise.

*Government instability.* The ICB actor-level dataset provides information on whether the crisis actor experiences government instability, which may include executive, constitutional, legal, and/or administrative structure changes within the relevant period preceding an international crisis. For this measure, the ICB dataset codes the observations as '1' if there is a significant increase in government instability, '2' if the government is stable, and '3' if there is a significant decrease in government instability. For a more direct measure of escalating governmental instability, I create a dichotomous variable coding the cases where there is a significant increase in the level of government instability as '1' and '0' otherwise.

*Ethno-religious heterogeneity.* For the operationalization of this concept, I use two different measures that I adopt from the dataset of Fearon and Laitin's (2003) study. The first measure is the number of distinct languages spoken by groups exceeding 1 percent of the country's population (see Grimes and Grimes, 1996). The second alternative measure captures the level of religious fractionalization, which Fearon and Laitin constructed using data from the *CIA Factbook* and other sources. In order to test my interactive hypothesis (H2), I generate two alternative multiplicative variables by interacting mass violence separately with each of the two measures of ethno-religious heterogeneity.

*Regime type.* The ICB dataset provides five different categories of this indicator including democratic regime, civil authoritarian regime, military-direct rule, military-indirect rule, and military dual authority. I generate a dummy variable where '1' denotes democratic regimes and '0' denotes authoritarian regimes, mainly because the original variable does not differentiate between levels of democracy while providing dissimilar types of authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup>

### *Control variables*

*Power discrepancy.* Several studies of state dyads have demonstrated that disparity in a dyad's capabilities reduces the likelihood of violence initiation (see, e.g., Bremer, 1992). On the other hand, some scholars argue that states that possess a power advantage over an adversary are much more likely to take military action in crisis situations (see, e.g., Prins, 2005). My model controls for this external determinant of interstate conflict by including the ICB variable 'power discrepancy'. The ICB dataset assigns a power score for each crisis actor and its principal adversary based on six separate scores measuring population size, GNP, territorial size, alliance capability, military expenditure, and nuclear capability at the onset of a crisis. The power that a crisis actor possesses and has at its disposal from alliance partners (i.e. those countries that are connected to the crisis actor through some type of collective security agreement) immediately prior to an international crisis is then compared with that of the actor's principal adversary (or adversaries) to create a final power discrepancy score, which ranges from -179 to +179. Negative values indicate a power discrepancy that is to the disadvantage of a crisis actor whereas positive values demonstrate that a crisis actor is stronger than an adversary. To generate a measure that indicates less power disparity as the score gets closer to zero (and vice versa), I take the square of the original ICB power discrepancy variable. This allows one to also capture the potential non-linear nature of this variable.

*Contiguity.* On contiguity, Geller (2000: 413) presents two major perspectives. The first is that geographic opportunity provides physical opportunity for wars and increases a nation's

involvement in a foreign conflict. The second thesis suggests that proximity structures the ‘context of interaction’, which increases the probability of conflictual relations and enhances the motivations for war. At the dyad level, proximity is the strongest predictor of war probability (see Henderson, 1997; Vasquez, 1993). Hence, I control for this factor with the expectation that when crisis actors share a border, there will be a greater likelihood of the external use of force. The ICB system level data refers to this variable as the geographical proximity of principal adversaries. The coding values are ‘1’ distant, ‘2’ near neighbors, and ‘3’ contiguous.

**Gravity.** This ICB variable identifies the ‘gravest’ threat a crisis actor faces during a crisis, which ranges from 0 to 7. Most studies suggest that increases in this measure lead to increases in the likelihood of violence in an international crisis (see Hewitt and Wilkenfeld, 1999; Trumbore and Boyer, 2000). That said, DeRouen and Sprecher (2004) find that gravity – as a measure of domestic political loss – has a negative impact on the use of force due to a tendency to reject violence as an initial policy option when the regime is threatened. Following DeRouen and Sprecher, I recode the original ICB variable as ‘1’ if there is a political threat and ‘0’ otherwise to capture any serious political risk a crisis actor faces during a crisis.

**Trigger level.** The trigger or precipitating cause of a foreign policy crisis refers to the specific act, event, or situational change that leads to (1) a crisis actor’s perception of the crisis as a threat to one’s basic values, (2) constrained time pressure for responding to the threat, and (3) heightened probability of involvement in military hostilities (Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 2000). It is reasonable to expect that states will react to a crisis with the level of action (be it economic, diplomatic, or military) that matches the level of the trigger (see Trumbore and Boyer, 2000). More specifically, I expect that the likelihood of the use of force will increase in response to more violent triggers. For this variable, I employ the original ICB indicator ‘trigger to foreign policy crisis’, which ranges from 1 (verbal act) to 9 (violent act) in line with the trigger’s level of intensity.

## Empirical results

Some states are more likely than others to get involved in international crises, such as major powers and enduring rivals. An attempt to identify possible factors that are specific to each crisis actor would be a strenuous and redundant task. Instead, I employ a panel-estimated approach – random effects probit – to control for country-specific effects likely to be present in the error term. In accordance with my theoretical framework, I adopt the crisis actor as my unit of analysis.

The baseline analytical model is as follows:

$$\Pr(Y_{ij} = 1 | X_{ij}, v_i) = f(\beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{mass violence})_{ij} + \beta_2(\text{economic downturn})_{ij} + \beta_3(\text{government instability})_{ij} + \beta_4(\text{power discrepancy})_{ij} + \beta_5(\text{contiguity})_{ij} + \beta_6(\text{gravity})_{ij} + \beta_7(\text{trigger level})_{ij} + \beta_8(\text{regime type})_{ij} + v_i)$$

where  $\Pr(Y_{ij} = 1 | X_{ij}, v_i)$  denotes the probability of external use of force;  $v_i$  represents unit-specific effects.

For the analysis of the interactive effects of mass violence and ethno-religious heterogeneity, I add a multiplicative interaction variable to the baseline model, along with the constitutive terms of that interaction. For the testing of my hypotheses regarding regime type differences, I run the baseline model (excluding the regime type variable) for the subsets of democracies and autocracies. As the Wald  $\lambda^2$  results of the analyses demonstrate (see Tables 2, 3 and 4), the fit of each model is good.

**Table 1.** Frequency of the Use of Force according to a Crisis Actor's Experience of Domestic Problems Prior to an International Crisis, 1918–2005

	Mass violence		Economic downturn		Government instability	
	0	1	0	1	0	1
No use of force	443	76	317	151	403	117
Use of force	226	52	178	67	212	64
Use of force %	33%	40%	36%	30%	34%	35%

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics on the cross-tabulations of the use of force in international crises with three different forms of domestic problems (mass violence, economic downturn, and government instability). Among crisis actors who experience increased mass violence prior to the crisis, 40 percent use force. By comparison, if the country does not experience an increase in mass violence, only 33 percent resort to the use of force. In cases of economic decline, 30 percent of crisis actors use force, whereas cases of no economic downturn demonstrate the use of force 36 percent of the time. Finally, a change in the level of government instability indicates almost no variation across the use of force and non-use of force options (34 percent for no government instability and 35 percent for increased government instability). These preliminary results fall in line with my theoretical expectations that increased mass violence is more likely to lead to the use of force rather than other forms of domestic problems.

Table 2 presents the coefficients and standard errors of the random effects probit analysis, which provides a more rigorous test of my hypotheses. The results demonstrate strong support for my main hypothesis (H1) that, among domestic strife factors, only the level of mass violence indicates a statistically significant and positive impact on the likelihood to use force in international crises ( $p < 0.01$ ). Table 2 also shows that the predicted probability to use external force increases 14 percent as the level of mass violence goes from its minimum to its maximum value, thus

**Table 2.** Random Effects Probit Analysis of the Use of Force, 1918–2005

Variables	Coefficients (Std. error)	Changes in predicted probabilities
Mass violence	0.387** (0.165)	0.14
Economic downturn	-0.120 (0.129)	-0.04
Government instability	0.116 (0.145)	0.04
Power discrepancy	0.0001*** (.00001)	0.00002
Contiguity	0.165* (0.078)	0.06
Gravity	-0.326* (0.157)	-0.11
Trigger	0.127*** (0.020)	0.04
Regime type	0.018 (0.130)	0.006
Constant	-1.703*** (0.276)	-
Rho	0.055 (0.054)	
Log likelihood	-365.767	
N	633	
Wald $\chi^2(8)$	68.52***	

\*significant at  $p < 0.05$  level. \*\*significant at  $p < 0.01$  level. \*\*\*significant at  $p < 0.001$  level. One-tailed tests. The observations are grouped by crisis actor.

**Table 3.** Random Effects Probit Analysis of the Interactive Impact of Mass Violence and Ethno-religious Heterogeneity on the Use of Force, 1918–2005

Variables	Interaction Model 1 w/number of languages		Interaction Model 2 w/religious fractionalization	
	Coefficients (Std. error)	Changes in predicted probabilities	Coefficients (Std. error)	Changes in predicted probabilities
Number of languages × mass violence	−0.160*** (0.044)	−0.05	–	–
Religious fractionalization × mass violence	–	–	−2.830* (1.295)	−0.95
Mass violence	1.628*** (0.358)	0.58	1.675*** (0.497)	0.60
Economic downturn	−0.404* (0.177)	−0.13	−0.330* (0.176)	−0.11
Government instability	0.112 (0.215)	0.04	0.115 (0.216)	0.04
Power discrepancy	0.00006*** (0.00001)	0.00001	−0.00007*** (0.00002)	0.00002
Contiguity	−0.008 (0.090)	−0.002	0.106 (0.094)	0.03
Gravity	−0.674** (0.241)	−0.20	−0.587** (0.241)	−0.17
Trigger	0.102*** (0.026)	0.03	0.108*** (0.026)	0.04
Regime type	0.068 (0.166)	0.02	−0.228 (0.187)	−0.08
Number of languages	0.105*** (0.023)	0.03	–	–
Religious fractionalization	–	–	0.793* (0.462)	0.27
Constant	−1.515*** (0.333)	–	−1.550*** (0.398)	–
Rho	3.06e-07 (0.0001)	–	0.045 (0.067)	–
Log likelihood	−185.213	–	−195.077	–
N	360	–	360	–
Wald $\chi^2(10)$	63.64***	–	47.91***	–

\*significant at  $p < 0.05$  level. \*\*significant at  $p < 0.01$  level. \*\*\*significant at  $p < 0.001$  level. One-tailed tests. The observations are grouped by crisis actor.

demonstrating the substantive significance of the relationship. Contrary to the expectations heralded by diversionary theory, neither economic downturn nor government instability shows a statistically significant impact on the decision to use force.

Table 3 presents the findings for the analysis of the conditional impact of mass violence interacted with two alternative measures of ethno-religious heterogeneity on the likelihood to use force in international crises. Specifically, in one model I analyze the interaction of mass violence with the number of languages spoken whereas, in the other model, I examine the interaction of mass violence with religious fractionalization. Both interactions demonstrate statistically significant coefficients in the expected direction indicating that as the number of languages spoken and religious fractionalization in a country increase, the likelihood of the external use of force in the presence of increased mass violence decreases. In other words, mass violence under lower levels of ethno-religious heterogeneity makes the external use of force more likely, thus corroborating Hypothesis 2. In addition, the coefficient of mass violence in both interaction models is positive and statistically significant, further substantiating the baseline hypothesis (H1) concerning the main effect of mass violence on the external use of force. Regarding other measures of domestic problems, the economic downturn variable demonstrates statistical significance in both interaction models. However, contrary to the arguments based on diversionary theory, the coefficient sign is negative meaning that economic downturn, in fact, makes the external use of force less likely. Last, the government instability measure does not show statistical significance in these analyses.

**Table 4.** Random Effects Probit Analysis of the Use of Force for Democracies and Autocracies, 1918–2005

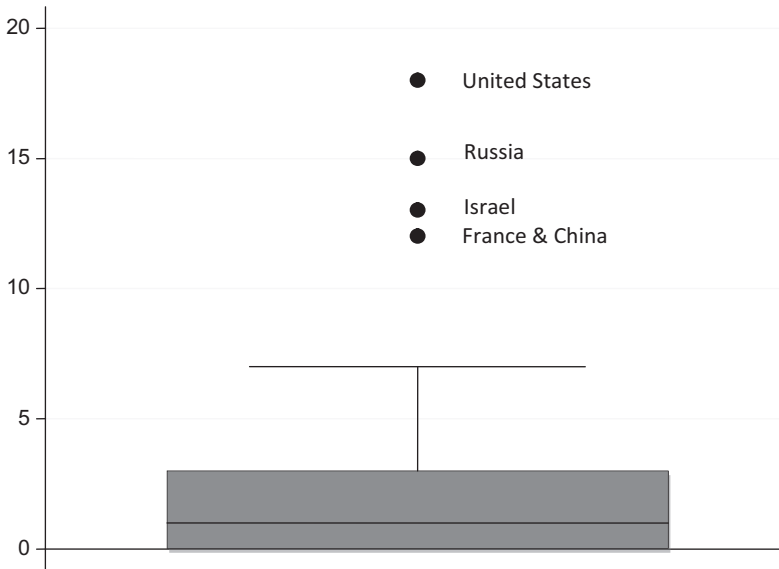
Variables	Subset 1: Democracies		Subset 2: Autocracies	
	Coefficients (Std. error)	Changes in predicted probabilities	Coefficients (Std. error)	Changes in predicted probabilities
Mass violence	0.782** (0.269)	0.30	0.255 (0.225)	0.09
Economic downturn	-0.315 (0.195)	-0.11	0.126 (0.185)	0.04
Government instability	0.317 (0.242)	0.12	0.133 (0.200)	0.05
Power discrepancy	0.0001** (0.00004)	0.00003	-0.00006 (0.0001)	-0.00002
Contiguity	-0.121 (0.097)	-0.04	0.528*** (0.136)	0.18
Gravity	-0.679* (0.312)	-0.21	-0.255 (0.198)	-0.08
Trigger	0.123*** (0.030)	0.04	0.166*** (0.031)	0.06
Constant	-0.954*** (0.288)	-	-3.003*** (0.490)	-
Rho	3.06e-07 (0.0002)		0.161 (0.095)	
Log likelihood	-155.156		-193.156	
N	285		348	
Wald $\chi^2(7)$	32.07***		45.05***	

\*significant at  $p < 0.05$  level. \*\*significant at  $p < 0.01$  level. \*\*\*significant at  $p < 0.001$  level. One-tailed tests. The observations are grouped by crisis actor.

Last, I analyze the probability of the use of force in international crises within the subsets of democracies and autocracies (see Table 4). The results indicate that the impact of mass violence is significant for democracies ( $p < 0.01$ ), which corroborates Hypothesis 3a. Specifically, mass violence leads to a 30 percent increase in the predicted probability of democracies using external force in an international crisis, which in fact constitutes the highest change in the predicted probability when compared with other factors. On the other hand, we do not observe such an effect for autocracies, which is in line with the expectations of Hypothesis 3b. As with the baseline model, the coefficients of economic downturn and governmental instability do not demonstrate statistical significance for either regime type.

Regarding the control variables, the results are generally consistent across the different model specifications. For the baseline model and for the subset of autocracies, the likelihood of the external use of force increases as the contiguity between crisis actors increases. The variable ‘gravity’ has a statistically significant and negative impact on the probability of the external use of force. Thus, when a regime’s survival is at stake, leaders are less likely to use force in international crises due to the high level of political risk involved (see DeRouen and Sprecher, 2004). As expected, a violent trigger significantly attracts more violent responses across all the models. The results show that the power discrepancy between principal adversaries has a positive curvilinear impact on the external use of force for the subset of democracies. Both measures of ethno-religious heterogeneity, ‘number of languages’ and ‘religious fractionalization’, demonstrate a statistically significant and positive impact on the use of force in international crises.

How robust are these findings? The frequency of use of force for the period 1918–2005 varies considerably among the 139 countries in the dataset. The boxplot depicted in Figure 1 illustrates that there are five outliers regarding the use of force: the United States, Russia, Israel, France, and China. To ensure that the results are not driven by only a few states, I conducted sensitivity



**Figure 1.** Boxplot of Frequency of the Use of Force by Countries, 1918–2005

analyses that excluded those countries with an unusually high number of ‘use of force’ incidents. The results of these additional analyses demonstrate that the statistical patterns of the original analyses continue to hold even if the outlier countries are dropped from the dataset, and thus corroborate the robustness of the main findings.

As further robustness checks, I conducted preliminary analyses with an alternative dataset using the MID data and a more identity-based measure of domestic turmoil – ethnic violence – as my major independent variable to capture cohesionary motives. Overall, these additional analyses generated consistent findings that parallel the original results of my analyses using the ICB data. I also ran diagnostic models using standard binomial probit and logistic regressions with robust standard errors. In addition, I employed an ordered logit using a different configuration of my dependent variable by further distinguishing between violent and non-violent military acts to ensure that dichotomizing the use of force did not lead to a loss of critical information. The results are similar to the original models. I also conducted sensitivity analyses with disaggregated measures of regime type and gravity as well as with the original un-squared and natural-logged values of power discrepancy. The results are consistent across all models with no major differences from the main findings provided here, and thus confirm the general robustness of my findings.<sup>7</sup>

As a final note, one may expect that a country that experiences one type of domestic problem is also likely to experience others. To put it differently, if there is a high level of mass violence in a country, it is probable that the country is also experiencing an economic downturn and/or government instability. This possibility raises concerns regarding the issue of multicollinearity. One way to detect whether the sample suffers from a multicollinearity problem is to check if pair-wise correlations among the explanatory variables are extremely high, say, in excess of 0.8 (see Gujarati, 2003). As Table 5 shows, none of the pair-wise correlations among the explanatory variables are high; in fact, they are all below 0.4. Therefore, multicollinearity does not appear to be a problem in the analysis. As an alternative method to detect multicollinearity in the data, I reassessed each of

**Table 5.** Pair-wise Correlations among Explanatory Variables

	Violence	Economy	Instability	Power	Contiguity	Gravity	Trigger	Regime	# of Lan.	Rel. Frac.
Violence	1.00									
Economy	0.24*	1.00								
Instability	0.36*	0.24*	1.00							
Power	-0.03	-0.05	-0.01	1.00						
Contiguity	0.06	-0.06	0.05	-0.25*	1.00					
Gravity	-0.14*	-0.04	-0.08*	0.08*	-0.14*	1.00				
Trigger	-0.01	-0.06	-0.05	-0.16	0.11*	-0.11*	1.00			
Regime	-0.12*	-0.02	-0.16*	0.12*	-0.15*	-0.12*	0.14*	1.00		
# of Lan.	0.12*	0.11*	0.11*	-0.02*	-0.08	0.001	0.07	-0.27*	1.00	
Rel. Frac.	-0.06	0.002	-0.11*	0.05	-0.19*	0.22*	-0.12*	0.19*	0.14*	1.00

\*significant at  $p < 0.05$  level.

the models with variance inflation factors (VIF). Overall, the mean VIF values for the baseline model and the models analyzing regime type differences are less than 1.5. However, the inclusion of the multiplicative variables to the baseline model for the interaction analyses results in inflated mean VIF values. Nevertheless, the VIF value remains smaller than 5.5 even in the interaction models, which is well below the VIF value of 10 that scholars consider to be the excess point (see Gujarati, 2003).

## Conclusion

In this study, I have asserted that cohesionary – rather than diversionary – motives primarily influence the propensity of political leaders to use external force. Based on this argument, I pursued the identification of the internal dynamics and preconditions that could instigate or contain such cohesionary incentives to resort to the use of force in international crises. I find that increased mass violence is more likely than other forms of domestic problems (be it an economic downturn or government instability) to lead to the external use of force during international crises because it prompts political leaders to engage in cohesionary policy tactics to achieve and sustain order in their country via increasing solidarity for their survival. I also find that the impact of mass violence on the use of force is contingent on the level of ethno-religious diversity as well as the regime type of a country.

The results of my analyses provide strong support for my theoretical framework and hypotheses, and point to an essential contribution and refinement to the literature on domestic turmoil and the external use of force. Anchored in my proposition that each domestic factor instigates a different policy need, my analysis incorporates the major domestic indicators simultaneously in a single empirical model. I find a positive and significant relationship only between mass violence and the external use of force. Further analyses within the subsets of different regime types indicate that such relationship holds only for democracies. The interaction of mass violence with alternative measures of ethno-religious heterogeneity also yields significant results. Specifically, the impact of increased mass violence on the likelihood to use external force is more pronounced in societies with lower levels of ethnic and religious divisions. As a final note, I find that neither economic downturn nor government instability has a positive, statistically significant influence on the likelihood to use external force, which lies in contrast to the well-known propositions derived from diversionary theory.



To conclude, this study reasserts the original assumption of in-group/out-group theory, which posits that the main objective of a leader's external use of force in the presence of domestic problems is cohesionary rather than diversionary. The findings encourage further exploration of the factors that instigate cohesionary motives as major explanatory dynamics in examining the linkage between internal turmoil and the use of force in international crises. Additionally, regarding the potential intervening factors having an influence on the cohesionary use of force, a future avenue of research may be exploring whether and how the presence of ethnic-based elements in domestic unrest may influence the nature of an international crisis in which a country becomes embroiled.

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### Notes

1. Throughout this paper, I use the term 'cohesionary' to describe actions that aim to achieve unity among members of a certain group. To my knowledge, there is no commonly used satisfactory alternative to employing my own term for the concept. Following the grammatical structure of the adjective 'diversionary', I thus combine the word *cohesion* with the suffix *-ary* to generate the term.
2. All the countries covered in this study were taken from the International Crisis Behavior Project (ICB) dataset.
3. Scholars commonly refer to social cohesion as 'the total field of forces which act on members to remain in the group' (Festinger et al., 1950: 164; see also Friedkin, 2004). Although the main focus of social psychological research on cohesion is on membership continuity and turnover, I suggest that group cohesion also entails intensity and salience of belonging to that particular group beyond simple membership and duration of that membership.
4. The diversionary literature points to the 'rally-around-the-flag' effect wherein leaders may benefit from a spike in their approval ratings immediately following a sudden, high profile foreign policy event. One should note the difference between a diversionary use of force to rally public support in the short run and a cohesionary use of force that aspires to achieve long-term national cohesion for containing mass violence. Many scholars suggest that the rally-around-the-flag phenomenon occurs at the very beginning of a conflict and usually lasts for only a very short period of time (see Baum, 2002; Lian and Oneal, 1993; Mueller, 1973). On the other hand, several scholars suggest that certain collective-identity related factors – as in the case of the formation of a cohesive social identity – are (albeit open to change) 'relatively stable' and not easily altered in the short-run (e.g. Smith, 1991; Wendt, 1994). Therefore, one may expect that the diversionary effects of an external conflict on the public are likely to be short-lived compared with the persistence of social cohesion (should it occur) following an external conflict.
5. It is important to note that even if strategic conflict avoidance arguments applied here, it would only make the analytical results more conservative. This is because if potential target states anticipate the external use of force in the presence of domestic problems and strategically avoid conflict with states that are experiencing such problems, it would generate smaller independent variable coefficients in my statistical analyses. In other words, if states have fewer opportunities to use force abroad during periods of domestic unrest, results indicating a significant relationship between mass violence and the use of force should be especially supportive of my argument.
6. The correlation between the ICB regime type variable and the *polity2* variable in the Polity IV database is high ( $r = 0.90$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Since all my other variables are from the ICB dataset, I prefer to use the ICB regime type variable for consistency. I should note that running the analyses with the *polity2* variable did not change the statistical results.
7. The results of these additional sensitivity analyses and robustness checks are available upon request.

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