

# Intervention, War Expansion, and the International Sources of Civil War

Hans-Inge Langø

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## **Abstract**

Why do some civil wars turn into interstate wars? I argue that two factors are important: the domestic government's ability to credibly threaten to retaliate against a third-party intervener, thereby expanding the conflict and raising the stakes; and whether the rebels prefer fighting alone or with external support. I analyze a formal model of civil war onset, intervention, and retaliation that shows interstate war happens when (a) the local stakes are moderately high, (b) the costs of fighting are low, and (c) the domestic government has some retaliatory capabilities. The model also has implications for the onset of civil war, providing an international and informational explanation for civil war. Lastly, when accounting for the strategic interaction, common predictors of civil war, such as intervener-rebel relations, change directions depending on the credibility of retaliation and rebel aims.

# 1 Introduction

Why do some civil wars turn into interstate wars while others do not? In this paper I focus on retaliation against external rebel supporters, because domestic governments differ in how they respond to third-party interventions. During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Iranian and Iranian-supported militia frequently targeted coalition troops. Yet the Bush administration decided not to retaliate. Other states respond more forcefully. The Soviet Union conducted cross-border shelling and a wide range of covert operations against Pakistan in response to their support for the Afghan Mujahideen. Sometimes intervention triggers interstate war. South Africa waged war against both Angola and Mozambique during the 1970s and 1980s in response to their support for the African National Congress, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths.

To explain these wars, we need a nested theory of intra- and interstate war. The threat of intervention can cause civil war (Cetinyan 2002, Thyne 2006), but it is not clear when the domestic government is willing to retaliate against external rebel supporters, thus prompting an interstate war, and how the threat of retaliation affects the decision to intervene. Most work assumes that retaliation is suboptimal (Schultz 2010, p. 285) and that governments must be pushed into retaliating (Carson 2016, pp. 111-4). These assumptions narrow the scope conditions to states who are either unwilling or unable to retaliate, which elides the possibility that states might prefer fighting an interstate war to tolerating intervention. Furthermore, existing theories of retaliation do not account for domestic bargaining the domestic government and opposition groups (Maoz and San-Akca 2012, pp. 722-4), so they cannot explain why these conflicts start in the first place, and why some become civil wars while others become international conflicts.

I construct a formal model of civil war onset, intervention, and retaliation that considers actors' incentives for maintaining or remaking the domestic and international status quo, and in which the domestic government is uncertain about the prospects of intervention. To explain the expansion of civil war into interstate war, two factors are important. First, we must consider the domestic government's ability to credibly threaten to retaliate against a third-party intervener and expand the conflict. Retaliation raises the stakes of the conflict, potentially increasing both the benefits and the costs of fighting. Second, the rebels either prefer to fight a civil war alone in a civil war (i.e., their war aims are local) or with external support (i.e., their war aims are expansive). Fighting alone means they are less likely to win the war, but fighting alongside a third party means giving up some autonomy.

Interstate war occurs in equilibrium when (a) the domestic government is uncertain about the prospects of intervention, but can credibly threaten to retaliate; (b) the rebels have expansive aims; and (c) the third party is willing to bear the costs of retaliation. The promise of raising the stakes explains when these conditions hold. It makes retaliation possible for the domestic government as it outweighs the costs of fighting a larger war, and it makes external support more attractive to the rebels as they have more to gain from fighting. However, the third party risks its own territory or wealth by fighting an interstate war. Therefore, the relative size of the local stakes cannot be too small nor too great for the actors to prefer war expansion. Furthermore, for domestic bargaining to break down and interstate war to occur, the domestic government must be able to deter some types of third parties with threats of retaliation, but not all.

The results explain why military strength is not a good predictor of war expansion, and instead we should consider the stakes involved. South Africa had lots to gain from fighting in

Angola and Mozambique, as it sought to stem the tide of African nationalism in the region (Minter 1994). The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was far more restrained in its response to intervention in Afghanistan, in part because the local stakes were so high relative to war with Pakistan. If we extend the logic of the model and consider changes in those stakes over time, the unexpected Soviet invasion made rebel-sided intervention more attractive, while reducing the credibility of retaliatory threats against Pakistan.

The model also has implications for explaining and predicting civil wars. First, uncertainty about intervention only causes local-only civil war when the rebels have limited aims, and fighting breaks out when the domestic government thinks intervention is relatively likely, but the third party ends up not intervening. The model therefore provides an informational and international explanation for civil war. Second, when we account for the triadic interaction, common predictors of conflict have different effects on the probability of civil war onset. For instance, stronger rebels make intervention less likely under non-credible retaliation, but more likely or less likely under credible retaliation, depending on the relative size of the domestic stakes and the rebel-intervener relationship. Since the model shows that there are few consistent, unconditional relationships between the explanatory variables and the outbreak of civil war, omitting the dimensions of retaliation and rebel preferences can lead to biased estimates of conflict onset and outcomes.

## **2 Explanations for intervention and retaliation**

To explain how and why civil wars become interstate wars, we first have to consider how the threat of intervention can affect domestic bargaining. First, potential but uncertain foreign in-

tervention by a third party can cause the outbreak of civil war by disrupting domestic bargaining (Thyne 2006, pp. 942-5) or emboldening rebels (Kuperman 2008).<sup>1</sup> Second, interventions are not done at random. States intervene in civil wars to affect the outcome (Regan 1996), defeat rivals (Findley and Teo 2006, Maoz and San-Akca 2012), promote their ideology (Choi 2013, pp. 128-9) or support ethnic brethren (Gleditsch 2007, p. 298), and ensure access to economic markets (Aydin 2012). Therefore, the civil wars we observe are the result of a strategic interaction between domestic governments, rebels, and third parties.

What most of the studies on intervention omit, however, is an explicit theory of the rebels' calculus. We can think of rebel support as a supply-and-demand dynamic, where third parties prefer to support strong rebels, but strong rebels prefer to go it alone because they can win on their own (Salehyan et al. 2011, p. 711). If rebels have preferences and expectations over external support, both factors should affect their decision to fight, which in turn affects conflict onset and intervention. For instance, the contagion effect of civil wars is conditional on whether or not the rebels are secessionist or center-seeking (Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008, p. 229), which suggests that the internationalization of civil wars hinges on the war aims of rebels, because they define what domestic bargains are possible and what the outside options are, be it civil war or some international conflict.

Even if a third party can find a willing recipient, these interventions are not without risks. Supporting rebels can empower a rebel group so much so that the outside supporter can no longer control it (Salehyan 2010, Bapat 2012). Furthermore, there are numerous ways a civil war can become an interstate conflict. There might be unintended consequences, such as refugee

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<sup>1</sup>Cetinyan shows that under complete information, the presence of a third party intervener does not affect the likelihood of rebellion, only the demands made in equilibrium (Cetinyan 2002, pp. 647-8).

flows (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006, pp. 344-7), but the most severe risk for a third party is that a domestic government can retaliate against it for supporting rebels. This threat could ostensibly deter intervention, if the third party is unwilling to fight an interstate war. Gartner and Siverson (1996, p. 5) argue that few interstate wars expand beyond their original participants because initiators pick targets unlikely to receive external support. Their logic suggests that the interventions we observe should be due to deterrence failure. A credible threat of intervention can deter governments from starting civil wars, while a credible threat of retaliation can deter intervention.

However, we still observe both intervention and retaliation. Existing work on civil war intervention and escalation offer some explanations. Maoz and San-Akca (2012, pp. 720-5) argue that retaliation might deter intervention, particularly in the context of interstate rivalries. However, their theory does not specify rebel preferences over conflict expansion, so it does not distinguish between deterring intervention and deterring civil war onset. Furthermore, by having private information about the threat of retaliation, rather than the threat of intervention, the model does not explain the breakdown of domestic bargaining. As such, it is a model of interstate conflict, rather than variations in the internationalization of civil war.

Other theories focus on the role of secrecy as the mechanism of escalation. Carson argues that the ability to intervene covertly allows states to manage unintended escalation (Carson 2016, pp. 111-4). Retaliation happens because of overt intervention, when the intervener is not interested in managing escalation. But because his theory seeks to explain variation in secrecy, rather than retaliation, it is not clear how a target state can deter intervention in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Carson suggests that leaders "may feel trapped into escalating their involvement in a particular conflict to avoid damaging their reputation for support of partners and allies" (Carson 2016, p. 113).

Overt intervention, and thus a risk of escalation, is most likely in the context of "low technological sophistication, local conflicts with no or one-sided outside interest, and if intervening powers are domestically insulated and lack alliance considerations" (Carson 2016, p. 115). None of these factors can be influenced by the target state within the scope of the theory, so it only explains a subset of cases where the domestic government is restrained from retaliating, except when subjected to domestic political pressures. Similarly, Schultz (2010, p. 284) shows how rival states' ability to intervene in civil wars covertly can cause war expansion because they cannot credibly commit not to intervene against each other, thus prompting retaliation. However, the model assumes that expansion is suboptimal (Schultz 2010, p. 285). While this assumption helps explain how secrecy fuels conflict expansion, it does not explain cases where expansion of a conflict can be beneficial for some or all involved parties.

To understand why actors choose conflict escalation and expansion, we have to think of these interactions as domestic conflicts nested inside an international context. Models of intervention and civil war onset both imply that war is driven by a third party's or the rebels' wish to remake political order, and we should also consider what conflict expansion entails for the domestic government. As the literature on extended deterrence implies, conflicts between three actors mean different stakes (Gartner and Siverson 1996, Werner 2000), depending on the level of conflict and participation. In the context of civil war, retaliation can mean increasing the stakes and thus the payoffs of a conflict. Rather than fighting for the status quo against the rebels and an intervener, the government forces the third party's territory or resources into the stakes of the conflict by launching an interstate war, which conditions the behavior of both rebels and the third party. Without accounting for the domestic government's preferences over varying stakes, we cannot explain the variation in the internationalization of civil war, because

the threat of retaliation conditions the decisions of both rebels and third parties.

We therefore have two parts of the explanation for why some civil wars become interstate wars. First, we have to consider the domestic government's preferences for expanding a civil war, and how the threat of retaliation affects the rebels' and the intervener's subsequent decisions. Second, we have to consider the rebels' preferences, and how they affect domestic bargaining. In the next section I specify a formal model where the three actors can compete over two sets of stakes.

### **3 Modeling onset, intervention, and retaliation**

In this section I describe a finite game of civil war onset, intervention, and expansion in Country  $A$  with three actors: the domestic government  $D$ , a dissatisfied group  $R$ , and a third-party state  $T$  potentially supporting  $R$ . There are two main innovations in the model. First, the actors can fight over two sets of stakes; either they fight over a local set of stakes, or they fight over the local stakes plus an international set of stakes (combined, I refer to them as the total stakes).  $D$  effectively decides which one is being fought over by either retaliating against  $T$ , which prompts an interstate war, or tolerating intervention, which keeps the fighting contained to Country  $A$ 's territory. Second, I do not assume that the rebels strictly prefer external support to fighting alone. Intervention increases the likelihood of rebel victory, but it also imposes some costs in the form of a loss of autonomy.

**Definition 1** *Retaliation: The use of force against the third party intervener outside of the original civil war, which escalates the conflict to an interstate war.*

The game starts with nature drawing  $T$ 's type, as defined by its cost of intervening in the



domestic government's territory ( $c_T > 0$ ). These costs can represent arms or troops sent across the border. I assume that  $D$  does not know  $c_T$ , so it does not know whether  $T$  would be willing to intervene on the side of  $R$ .<sup>3</sup> I also assume that  $T$ 's type is uniformly distributed. The model will work for other distributions as well, as long as there is a non-trivial probability of low and high cost types.

I assume that the domestic government is the only actor uncertain about the intervener's type.<sup>4</sup> I make this assumption because opposition groups often times communicate with third parties before the start of a civil war. They might ask for help, and a third party might offer support in exchange for influence in a new regime. For instance, the Palestine Liberation Organization had extensive political and military connections with other Arab countries before the start of the First Intifada. While the rebels might not be perfectly informed about the intervener's war costs, I assume that they are better informed than their domestic opponent because of these opportunities for communication. Therefore, to simplify the analysis, I assume that the rebels are perfectly informed, whereas the domestic government is not.

Once  $T$ 's type has been drawn,  $D$  makes some take-it-or-leave-it offer, symbolized by  $x \in [0, 1]$ , to an opposition group  $R$ , and the offer can be a power-sharing agreement or part of the territory of Country A. Because the two actors are only bargaining over the local stakes, which I define as  $\pi \in (0, 1)$ ,  $R$  gets  $x\pi$  and  $D$  gets  $(1 - x)\pi$  in the event of a peaceful settlement.<sup>5</sup>  $T$ 's

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<sup>3</sup>It might be quite costly for  $T$  to intervene because of internal problems unknown to other actors. In those settings,  $T$  has an incentive to keep this information private, since it might reveal weakness if intervention costs are high, which implies that a lower-cost  $T$  might lack a cheap or credible way to separate itself from a high-cost  $T$ .

<sup>4</sup>This assumption is different from the private information posited by Thyne, who argues that governments should be better informed than opposition groups "because interstate relations happen almost exclusively between the governments of states due to internationally recognized norms of sovereignty" (Thyne 2006, p. 942). Since my model focuses on rebel-sided interventions, the rebels should be better informed than the target.

<sup>5</sup>An alternative modeling choice would be to allow  $D$  to make an offer to  $T$  as well, in the hopes of buying off the third party and removing the threat of intervention. However, it is unlikely that a third party could credibly commit not to intervene once a civil war breaks out, and including another mechanism for war would make the analytics needlessly complicated. Furthermore, it would not change why interstate war happens, because war expansion

utility for peace is a function of what  $R$  accepts and  $T$ 's affinity for  $R$  ( $b \in (0, 1)$ ). We can think of  $b$  as representing some influence  $T$  achieves with  $R$  sharing power or territory, and so the better  $R$  does in bargaining or the more  $T$  likes  $R$ , the better off the third party is. The actors' payoffs for peace are:

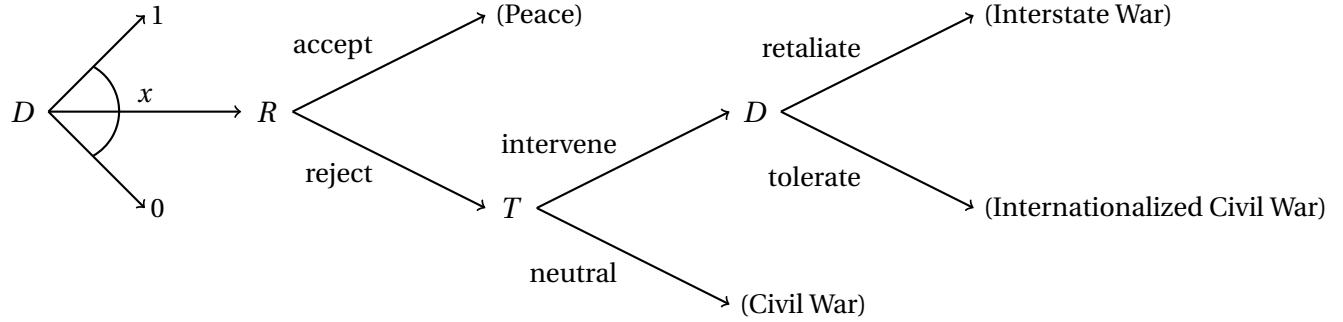
$$U_i(\text{Peace}) = \begin{cases} (1-x)\pi, & \text{if } i = D \\ x\pi, & \text{if } i = R \\ (1-\pi) + xb\pi, & \text{if } i = T \end{cases}$$

If the group rejects the offer, a civil war starts.  $T$  must then decide whether to intervene on the side of the rebels or stay out. If  $T$  stays out,  $D$  and  $R$  continue fighting over  $\pi$ . The likelihood of prevailing in the civil war is a costly lottery based on the two sides' military capabilities ( $m_D > 0$  and  $m_R > 0$ ), defined as  $\Pr(D \text{ victory}) = \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R}$  with the complementary probability of rebel victory. Because fighting a civil war is inefficient, both sides pay some cost in terms of destruction that is unique to each of them ( $c_D > 0$  and  $c_R > 0$ ).  $T$ 's payoff is dependent on  $R$ 's probability of winning and its affinity for the rebels, but it pays no costs. In the event of a civil war without intervention, the actors' payoffs are:

$$U_i(\text{Civil War}) = \begin{cases} (\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R})\pi - c_D, & \text{if } i = D \\ (\frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R})\pi - c_R, & \text{if } i = R \\ (1-\pi) + (\frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R})b\pi, & \text{if } i = T \end{cases}$$

**Definition 2** *Internationalized civil war*: A civil war becomes internationalized when a third-hinges on  $D$ 's willingness to retaliate once intervention has already taken place.

Figure 1: Domestic bargaining, intervention, and expansion



*party intervenes militarily in the conflict.*

If  $T$  decides to intervene, the level of intervention is a portion ( $w \in (0, 1)$ ) of its military capabilities  $m_T$ . I assume  $w$  is exogenously determined. For instance, geography or other factors might put constraints on how much  $T$  can intervene in a given conflict. Following intervention,  $D$  must fight both  $R$  and  $T$  in its territory, reducing its chances of victory, reducing its chances of victory ( $\Pr(D \text{ victory}) = \frac{m_D}{m_D + m_R + wm_T}$ ).  $R$  is aided in its civil war effort commensurately, but intervention comes at a cost. The third party gains influence over the rebels when it intervenes, resulting in a loss of autonomy for  $R$  ( $a > 0$ ). The extent of this loss depends on the affinity, or policy alignment, between the two actors, so  $R$  pays  $\frac{a}{b}$  when intervention happens. For instance, when rebels and interveners share the same ideology or policy preferences, the latter is less likely to dominate the former or dictate the political order in the event of military victory. While intervention improves  $R$ 's chances of winning,  $T$  must pay intervention costs ( $c_T$ ), and its utility of victory is still a product of its affinity for the rebels. Once intervention has taken place, the domestic government must decide whether to retaliate against the intervener or not. If it does not retaliate, the conflict continues as an internationalized civil war, and we get the following payoffs:

$$U_i(\text{Internationalized Civil War}) = \begin{cases} \left(\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+wm_T}\right)\pi - c_D, & \text{if } i = D \\ \left(\frac{m_R+wm_T}{m_D+m_R+wm_T}\right)\pi - c_R - \frac{a}{b}, & \text{if } i = R \\ (1 - \pi) + \left(\frac{m_R+wm_T}{m_D+m_R+wm_T}\right)b\pi - c_T, & \text{if } i = T \end{cases}$$

If  $D$  chooses to retaliate, the conflict is expanded so that  $D$  is attacking  $T$  directly, either against the third-party territory or some other object of interest, such as an ally or client state of  $T$ . In effect,  $D$  raises the stakes of the fighting to include what  $T$  otherwise controls ( $1 - \pi$ ), so that all the actors are fighting over the total stakes (normalized to 1).  $D$ 's payoff is potentially greater since victory means defeating both adversaries. However, there are additional costs associated with retaliation. Fighting two wars at once comes with an additional escalation cost ( $e_D > 0$ ), which represent  $T$ 's ability to impose costs in its own territory.  $T$  might have particularly strong defensive structures or the ability to wage guerrilla warfare against  $D$ 's troops. Furthermore, because the conflict is now an interstate war, all of  $T$ 's resources are mobilized, so the domestic government must fight against the full military strength of the intervener, with  $\Pr(D \text{ victory}) = \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T}$ .

Retaliation and war expansion affect the other two actors differently. For the rebels, escalation is beneficial when compared to fighting an internationalized civil war. It does not pay any additional costs of fighting, because it is still fighting in Country A, and whatever escalatory capabilities  $D$  has, those costs are borne by  $T$ . Furthermore,  $R$  gets the full military support of  $T$ . Thus,  $R$  may or may not prefer fighting alone to receiving external support (with or without retaliation), but they always prefer an interstate war to fighting an internationalized civil war. For the third party, however, escalation may or may not be beneficial.  $T$  must pay some escalatory

costs ( $e_T > 0$ ) on top of the intervention costs, which represent what destruction the domestic government can cause in the intervener's territory or against its interests. For instance,  $D$  might be able to use proxy forces, such as rebel groups in  $T$ 's territory, and so because  $D$  imposes these costs of retaliation on  $T$ , it is fully informed about them.

$T$  might also benefit from fighting an interstate war rather than fighting an internationalized civil war. In addition to mobilizing its entire military against  $D$ , when  $T$  is fighting over the entire set of stakes, its utility for the local stakes is no longer moderated by  $b$ , the influence it would have in the event of rebel victory. This shift captures the changing nature of the conflict. By going from an internationalized civil war to an interstate war, the two states become the dominant actors, as  $T$  is no longer reliant on its relationship with  $R$  to make gains in Country A. We therefore get the following payoffs for the actors in the event of an interstate war:

$$U_i(\text{Interstate War}) = \begin{cases} \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_D - e_D, & \text{if } i = D \\ \frac{m_R+m_T}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_R - \frac{a}{b}, & \text{if } i = R \\ \frac{m_R+m_T}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_T - e_T, & \text{if } i = T \end{cases}$$

#### 4 Explaining interstate war

In this section I analyze the model to explain when interstate war occurs (see Supplementary Appendix for proofs). I identify a Perfect Bayesian Equilibrium (PBE) where domestic bargaining breaks down, a third party intervenes, and the domestic government retaliates. This equilibrium requires that the threat of retaliation is credible, the rebels prefer fighting with a third party (i.e. they have expansive aims), and the third party prefers fighting an interstate war to

staying out of a civil war.

Because this is a game with private information, I will note how the specific structure of the information asymmetry shapes the domestic government's strategies. While  $T$ 's type is continuous,  $R$  only cares if intervention is coming or not. Likewise,  $D$  does not care about  $T$ 's specific costs of intervention, but only whether or not the third party prefers intervention to staying out.  $D$ 's strategies are therefore defined by cut-points, and whether it believes  $T$ 's type lies above or below that point. Since it knows  $R$ 's decision-rules,  $D$  in the bargaining stage makes offers to  $R$  for all or some range of types  $T$ .

**Proposition 1** *The following strategies and beliefs constitute a Perfect Bayesian Equilibrium where interstate war occurs with positive probability:*

- When the threat of retaliation is credible ( $\pi \leq \frac{(\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - e_D)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{m_D}$ ) and the rebels have expansive war aims ( $\pi \leq \frac{(-m_D-m_R)((a-b)(m_R+m_T)+am_D)}{bm_R(m_D+m_R+m_T)}$ ),
- $D$ , which does not know  $T$ 's type and whether it will intervene, makes a small offer to  $R$  ( $x_{local} = \frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R} - \frac{c_R}{\pi}$ ) when  $a \leq \gamma^*$ . Otherwise, it makes a large offer ( $x_{inter} = \frac{\frac{m_R+m_T}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - \frac{a}{b} - c_R}{\pi}$ ).
- If  $x_{inter}$  is offered,  $R$  always accepts, resulting in peace. If  $x_{local}$  is offered,  $R$  accepts if  $T$  is not intervening, but otherwise rejects the offer.
- $T$  intervenes if  $\pi \geq \frac{c_T + \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} + e_T}{1 - \frac{bm_R}{m_D+m_R}}$ , and otherwise stays neutral.
- If  $T$  intervenes,  $D$  updates its beliefs about  $T$ 's type, now certain that  $T$  is of a type that prefers intervention to staying neutral. Because  $D$  prefers interstate war to internationalized civil war, it retaliates, thus resulting in the expansion of the civil war.

To explain why interstate war happens, we first have to consider how bargaining breaks down, despite fighting being inefficient. When the threat of retaliation is credible and the rebels have expansive aims, domestic bargaining breaks down when  $R$  knows that  $T$  will intervene, but  $D$  makes an offer that is less than what  $R$  would get fighting an interstate war. Because the government sometimes is uncertain about whether intervention is coming or not, but knows  $R$ 's preferences,  $D$  only makes one of two offers in equilibrium: a large offer  $x_{\text{inter}}$  and a small offer  $x_{\text{local}}$ . The former is equivalent to what  $R$  would get in the event of interstate war, so it will buy off  $R$  for all types  $T$ . The latter, however, means risking war, because it is the minimum deal  $R$  will accept if intervention is not coming, but will reject if intervention is coming, thus prompting civil war. The government's dilemma is clear: it can guarantee peace, at a premium, or it can make a smaller offer that comes with some positive probability of interstate war.

The relative size of the local stakes and its role in the actors' decisions help explain when bargaining breaks down and interstate war occurs. Making a small offer comes with both benefits and risks for  $D$ , and the smaller the domestic stakes, the more attractive this risky move becomes, because it decreases the relative worth of a large offer guaranteeing peace. If a small offer is made, the rebels reject when they have expansive aims and intervention is coming.  $R$  prefers fighting an interstate war against  $D$  to fighting a civil war alone when  $\pi$  is relatively low, so increased stakes make up for the loss in autonomy. However,  $T$  only intervenes when the local stakes are sufficiently high, because retaliation puts  $T$ 's territory  $(1 - \pi)$  into play and imposes escalation costs on  $T$ . Following intervention,  $D$  retaliates against  $T$  when the local stakes are sufficiently low, so that the increase in stakes is sufficient to make up for the additional costs of fighting an interstate war.

These constraints imply that interstate war is more likely to happen for some intermediary

range for the value of the domestic stakes.  $\pi$  cannot be so low that  $T$  prefers to stay out, but it cannot be so high that  $D$  prefers tolerating intervention,  $D$  makes a large offer, or  $R$  prefers fighting alone because the larger  $\pi$  gets, the smaller  $1 - \pi$  becomes. Which of these upper bounds are more constraining depend on the specific value of various other parameters.

The various costs of fighting also help explain the occurrence of interstate war. The costs of fighting in the civil war territory has to be relatively low for all three actors. The less destructive fighting is, the more likely  $D$  is to risk interstate war and  $T$  to intervene.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, retaliation has to be relatively inexpensive for  $D$  for it to prefer retaliation to tolerating intervention. However, since it does not know  $T$ 's costs of intervening,  $D$  must be able to impose some escalation costs on  $T$ . Put differently,  $D$  must believe it can deter some types  $T$  for it to ever risk interstate war, but it cannot be so strong that  $T$  would always be deterred for interstate war to occur in equilibrium.

Another necessary condition for this PBE to exist is that  $R$ 's and  $T$ 's incentives are sufficiently aligned. In the above model, the incentives for  $R$  and  $T$  to fight are interdependent because in the event of an interstate war, they fight in a coalition together against  $D$ . An alternative assumption could be that instead of them fighting together, in an interstate war, the conflict becomes a free-for-all, where all three fight alone for their share of the larger stakes. Instead of fighting over the political order of one country, the actors are now remaking the political order of both countries. We can think of this reordering as warring parties carving out territory. With this change, however, interstate war cannot happen in equilibrium, because the size of  $\pi$  is never high enough to satisfy the third party while also low enough to make the rebels fight.

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<sup>6</sup>  $R$ 's war costs also factor in to the decision to risk interstate war, because the higher they are, the smaller  $D$ 's safe offer becomes, and vice-versa.



Put differently, interstate war is too costly for the third party, while fighting a civil war is not expensive enough for the rebels to want to fight for the larger stakes.

**Lemma 4.1** *When the rebels' and the third party's military capabilities do not accumulate, and the actors fight in a free-for-all, interstate war does not happen in equilibrium because the rebels' ( $\pi \leq \rho^*$ ) and the third party's threshold ( $\pi \geq \tau^*$ ) for fighting cannot be met simultaneously ( $\rho^* > \tau^*$ ).*

The lack of an interstate war equilibrium suggests that war expansion is conditional on not just the domestic government's incentives to fight, but whether the rebels' and the third party's incentives for fighting align sufficiently. Coalition fighting might therefore be a necessary condition for civil wars escalating to interstate war. Alternatively, we might be dealing with two distinct sets of cases that require two different models, and additional assumptions are required to explain interstate war under free-for-all fighting.

#### 4.1 Internationalized civil war

When the threat of retaliation is not credible, the dynamics change. I identify an equilibrium where the domestic government risks an internationalized civil war by making an offer ( $x_{\text{local}}$ ) to expansive-aim rebels that they only accept if intervention is not coming. Proposition 2 lays out the formal logic of the equilibrium.

**Proposition 2** *The following strategies and beliefs constitute a Perfect Bayesian Equilibrium where internationalized civil war occurs with positive probability:*

- *When the threat of retaliation is non-credible ( $\pi \geq \frac{\left(\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - e_D\right)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{m_D}$ ) and the rebels have expansive war aims ( $\pi \geq \frac{a(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{bwm_Dm_T}$ ),*

- *D, which does not know T's type and whether it will intervene, makes a small offer to R ( $x_{local} = \frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R} - \frac{c_R}{\pi}$ ) when  $a \leq \alpha^\ddagger$ . Otherwise, it makes a large offer ( $x_{interciv} = 1 - \frac{a}{b\pi} - \frac{c_R}{\pi} - \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+wm_T}$ ).*
- *If  $x_{interciv}$  is offered, R always accepts, resulting in peace. If  $x_{local}$  is offered, R accepts if T is not intervening, but otherwise rejects the offer.*
- *T intervenes if  $\pi \geq \frac{c_T(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{bwm_Dm_T}$ , and otherwise stays neutral.*
- *If T intervenes, D updates its beliefs about T's type, now certain that T is of a type that prefers intervention to staying neutral. Because D prefers internationalized civil war to interstate war, it decides to tolerate the intervention, resulting in an internationalized civil war.*

Under non-credible retaliation, and unlike Proposition 1, rebels are more likely to have expansive aims the larger the domestic stakes are. As  $\pi$  increases, R's autonomy loss from receiving external support becomes an ever-decreasing proportion of its payoff in internationalized civil war, making R more likely to hold expansive war aims. The third party intervenes, prompting the rebels to reject a small offer, when it can help the rebels enough to win to offset the costs of intervening. The bigger the local stakes, the more beneficial the intervention is for the third party as it is helping capture a larger set of stakes ( $\pi \geq \tau^\ddagger$ ).

These constraints suggest that internationalized civil war is more likely the greater the domestic stakes are relative to the international stakes, because the decisions to reject an offer, intervene, and not retaliate all depend on them being sufficiently high. However, they also make D less inclined to risk internationalized civil war by making a low offer in the first place. As  $\pi$

increases, the larger, safer offer to  $R$  becomes increasingly attractive to  $D$ . Therefore, increases in the relative size of the local stakes make internationalized civil war more likely if civil war has broken out, but decreases the probability of civil war starting in the first place.

**Lemma 4.2** *Increases in the relative size of the local stakes make internationalized civil war more likely conditional on civil war happening, but makes the onset of civil war less likely.*

Comparing the constraints for Proposition 1 and 2, we see that they do not overlap for values of  $\pi$ . In Proposition 1, the credible threat of retaliation defines an upper bound of the relative size of the local stakes, whereas in Proposition 2, the non-credible threat defines a lower bound. Other than the trivial circumstance of when  $\pi = \frac{\left(\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - e_D\right)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{m_D}$ , the equilibria for internationalized civil war and interstate war cannot exist simultaneously. Internationalized civil war occurs for higher values of  $\pi$  than interstate war, which implies that when the local stakes of a potential conflict increase (decrease), they make internationalized civil war more (less) likely while making interstate war commensurately less (more) likely.<sup>7</sup>

**Lemma 4.3** *Increases in the relative size of the local stakes make internationalized civil war more likely relative to interstate war, and vice-versa.*

Consider  $\pi$  from the perspectives of  $D$  and  $T$ . When the local stakes are low relative to the international stakes, it means the domestic government has much to gain from defeating the other state, but the third party has little to gain from intervening. As the local stakes increase relative to the international stakes, winning the civil war becomes increasingly important for

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<sup>7</sup>Note that these are relative changes in likelihood. The likelihood of interstate war is not strictly decreasing in the size of  $\pi$  because at some point the stakes are so low that  $T$  would never intervene (lower bound of  $\pi$ ), and therefore  $R$  would never reject a low offer. Similarly, the likelihood of internationalized civil war is not strictly increasing in the size of  $\pi$  because when the stakes are too high,  $D$  would never risk war because intervention is but certain (upper bound of  $\pi$ ).

both. One example of this could be the discovery of oil reserves in  $D$ 's territory. While such a discovery would not necessarily impact the military balance of power immediately, it would affect the balance of benefits between the two states. Under such circumstances,  $D$  would be less willing to fight an interstate war than before because the local stakes have become more valuable relative to what  $T$  controls, but this change would also make  $T$  more willing to intervene as it has more resources to gain.

## 4.2 Cases of war expansion

With the equilibrium logic laid out above, I now turn to cases of expansion and non-expansion to illustrate what this strategic interaction looks like in practice. The relative size of the local stakes ( $\pi$ ) plays a crucial part in determining all three actors' preferences, and in particular when we get interstate war and when the domestic government tolerates intervention. During the American Civil War, Great Britain considered intervening on the side of the Confederacy. It was militarily stronger than the United States, particularly with its large navy, but ended up staying out of the conflict. It remained neutral because in large part because it would have prompted an interstate war, including a naval war and an invasion of Canada.<sup>8</sup> While Great Britain might have won such a war, my model suggests that we have to consider what it already controlled and whether it was willing to risk it ( $1 - \pi$ ). In this particular case, the United States did not threaten Britain's home territory, but it threatened Canada. Furthermore, the ongoing Taiping Rebellion threatened British access to Chinese markets (Platt 2012, p. 233), so the op-

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<sup>8</sup>The British government was keenly aware of the risks of getting involved. In fall 1861, Prime Minister Palmerston declared that British policy should be to "keep quite clear of the conflict" to avoid war (Carroll 2012, p. 94). While the British government was ultimately willing to go to war with the United States, they recognized that Canada was particularly vulnerable to a U.S. invasion and that escalation would entail war at sea, potentially even against British colonies (Bourne 1961, pp. 621-8).

portunity costs of intervening in the American Civil War were potentially significant. In line with the expectations of the model, the local stakes of the American conflict were relatively low when compared to other strategic considerations.

Considering the role of local stakes is difficult without a proper comparison, but cases with exogenous shocks can help us leverage variation over time, per Lemma 4.1. The Afghan Civil War, which started in 1978 as a peasant rebellion (Gibbs 1986), suffered at least one major shock, the Soviet invasion in December 1979. Before the invasion, various neighbors, including Pakistan and Iran, supported the rebels, but there is little evidence of the Kabul government conducting retaliation against them. Following the Soviet invasion, we would expect to see less intervention, if the military balance of power is a key determinant, and retaliation if intervention happened. Instead, the invasion prompted the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia to form an intervention coalition that resulted in billions of dollars in arms and money flooding into the conflict over the next decade or so, despite concerns about Soviet retaliation against Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, there was only limited retaliation, which included the shelling of Pakistani border posts and covert operations inside Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Following the invasion, U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski conceded that the rebels were "badly organized and poorly led," but that the United States should support them. Later on, the Reagan administration decided to escalate its involvement in the conflict. Primary documents from the period suggest that the White House increasingly came to see the Kremlin as weak on Afghanistan and concerned about the war's effect on efforts to renew detente. See: Telegram, Secretary of State to American embassy in Moscow, October 1981, folder "Afghanistan (07/14/1981-12/26/1981)," box 34, Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library; Memo, C. Hill to Robert C. McFarlane, November 29, 1983, folder "Soviet Project," RAC box 14, Donald Fortier Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library; Memo, Herbert E. Meyer to William J. Casey, June 21, 1984, folder "Soviet Union - US Policy Toward the Soviet Policy," RAC box 15, Donald Fortier Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>10</sup>Early examples of the assessment of cross-border intimidation can be found in: "An Intelligence Assessment, July 1982," 1982. "Pakistan: Tough Choices on Afghanistan," NES 82-10366. Central Intelligence Agency Electronic Reading Room. [http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document\\_conversions/89801/DOC\\_0000534961.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000534961.pdf); "Special National Intelligence Assessment, 14 August 1984," 1982. "Soviet Policy Toward the United States in 1984," SNIE 11-9-84. Central Intelligence Agency Electronic Reading Room. [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000518055.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000518055.pdf). For more information about Afghan and Soviet covert operations and support for rebels in Pakistan, see: (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2005, pp. 355-67).

Why was a stronger domestic government unable to deter intervention? My model suggests that by invading Afghanistan, the Soviet Union increased the local stakes relative to the international stakes. This change made intervention more attractive to third parties, even compensating for the increased escalation costs potentially imposed by Soviet military attacks against Pakistan. Furthermore, this increase in  $\pi$  commensurately made the benefit from defeating the interveners, especially Pakistan, smaller. This implies that government-sided intervention can actually encourage rebellion and rebel-sided intervention, while reducing the risk of war expansion.

Besides the role of the local stakes, the costs of fighting, and in particular the costs of escalation, play an important role in determining war expansion. During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Iran armed and trained Shiite militias. Both the Bush and Obama administrations considered retaliating at several points, but always decided against striking Iran directly, because of the escalation costs Iran could impose.<sup>11</sup> The restraining effect of escalation costs become apparent when we compare the Iraq case to the situation the United States found itself during the Vietnam War. There, the United States was also fighting a counter-insurgency with external rebel supporters, with insurgent forces using both Laos and Cambodia as sanctuaries from which they launched attacks. While President Richard Nixon was hesitant about expanding the conflict, several rebel offensives starting in February 1969 prompted President Richard Nixon to approve of a military response against Cambodia, including extensive bombing campaigns and an invasion.<sup>12</sup> One explanation for the difference in these two cases, and supported by the predictions of the model, is that Cambodia, unlike Iran, did not have the ability to impose

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<sup>11</sup>Given the recency of these events, primary sources are sparse. For an account of the the Bush administration's deliberations see: (Filkins 2013).

<sup>12</sup>For details on Johnson's decision-making, see Herring (2002, ch. 6). For discussions of Nixon's change of course, starting with the "Madman theory," see: Dallek (2007, pp. 104-109).

significant escalation costs on the United States if it retaliated.<sup>13</sup>

In some cases, both the relative size of the local stakes and escalation costs play a significant role in the expansion of civil war. Similar to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the United States in Iraq, South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s enjoyed military superiority relative to its neighbors, while fighting a rebellion. Its response to other African countries' support for the African National Congress (ANC), however, was drastically different. South Africa engaged in a wide range of military operations against both Angola and Mozambique, to compel them to stop supporting the ANC. Other countries supported the ANC too, but the white nationalist government saw the two countries as good targets to coerce other states too, especially members of the British Commonwealth that it could not attack directly (Minter 1994, pp. 117-120). One explanation for this forceful response, supported by my theory, is that the rise of African nationalism was particularly threatening to South Africa. It therefore had much to gain by stemming the revolutionary tide in southern Africa. Another important aspect of South African behavior during this period was that in both Angola and Mozambique it had allies or proxy forces it could delegate fighting to, particularly UNITA and RENAMO. Its escalation costs were thus moderated, while fighting for relatively large international stakes.

These contrasting cases illustrate the utility of the theory. The relative size of the local stakes and the escalation costs associated with retaliation provide a more intuitive explanation for war expansion than the military balance of power between the actors. Specifically, we should understand the decision to expand a conflict as weighing the potential benefits against the potential costs, and these parameters are not strictly defined by the characteristics of the civil war.

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<sup>13</sup>There are some indications that the Cambodian King was not able to kick the communists out of Cambodia and did not have extensive control of the country's territory. See: Isaacs et al. (1987, p. 89).

## 5 Explaining civil war

The model presented in this paper also has implications for our understanding of civil wars, especially when and why they start. One of the equilibrium constraints for Proposition 1 (interstate war) was that the rebels must have expansive aims. When they do not (i.e. they prefer fighting alone), civil war without intervention can occur in equilibrium because of uncertainty over intervention (regardless of whether the threat of retaliation is credible or not). As such, the model produces an international and informational explanation for civil war.<sup>14</sup>

**Proposition 3** *The following strategies and beliefs constitute a Perfect Bayesian Equilibrium where civil war occurs with positive probability:*

- When the threat of retaliation is credible ( $\pi \leq \frac{\left(\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - e_D\right)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{m_D}$ ) and the rebels have local war aims ( $\pi \geq \frac{(-m_D-m_R)((a-b)(m_R+m_T)+am_D)}{bm_R(m_D+m_R+m_T)}$ ),
- $D$ , which does not know  $T$ 's type and whether it will intervene, makes a small offer to  $R$  ( $x_{inter} = \frac{\frac{m_R+m_T}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - \frac{a}{b} - c_R}{\pi}$ ) when  $a \geq \gamma^\dagger$ . Otherwise, it makes a large offer ( $x_{local} = \frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R} - \frac{c_R}{\pi}$ ).
- If  $x_{local}$  is offered,  $R$  always accepts, resulting in peace. If  $x_{inter}$  is offered,  $R$  accepts if  $T$  is intervening, but otherwise rejects the offer.
- $T$  intervenes if  $\pi \geq \frac{c_T + \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} + e_T}{1 - \frac{bm_R}{m_D+m_R}}$ , and otherwise stays neutral.
- If  $R$  rejects the offer,  $D$  updates its beliefs (trivially), but since  $T$  is not intervening, a local-only civil war ensues.

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<sup>14</sup>A similar PBE, defined by non-credible retaliation, is discussed in the appendix.



To explain how, we have to consider the rebels' preferences. If its autonomy loss in the event of intervention is particularly high, it prefers fighting alone to receiving external support. For example,  $R$  and  $T$  might subscribe to different political ideologies, or  $T$  might simply be so powerful so that it will dominate any political process after the end of the civil war. The rebels' preferences affect bargaining. When  $R$  prefers fighting a civil war alone to fighting with  $T$ 's support, and the threat of retaliation is credible, the large offer  $D$  makes is equivalent to what  $R$  gets in the event of civil war without intervention ( $x_{\text{local}}$ ), while the smaller offer is equivalent to what  $R$  gets in an interstate war ( $x_{\text{inter}}$ ). So when the rebels have local war aims, the relative size of the offers are flipped compared to Proposition 1. Civil war occurs with some positive probability in when  $D$  makes a small offer. It does so when it thinks intervention is likely, but if  $T$  decides not to intervene ( $\pi \leq \tau^*$ ),  $R$  rejects the low offer.  $D$  expecting intervention thus sets off a local-only civil war. This equilibrium shows how potential intervention can give a domestic government a better deal in bargaining with opposition groups than if intervention were not possible, but uncertainty can also cause civil war, if the third party ends up not intervening.

As with Proposition 1, civil war occurs for some intermediary range for the value of the domestic stakes, but the upper and lower bounds of  $\pi$  are different. When the rebels prefer fighting alone locally to fighting an interstate war, then they determine the minimum value of  $\pi$ . Another important distinction between the PBE in Proposition 1 and this equilibrium, is  $D$ 's decision to risk civil war. In the former, the risking-war constraint imposes an upper bound on  $\pi$ , but here, the domestic stakes have countervailing effects on the decision to risk civil war. Greater values of  $\pi$  make the larger offer more attractive, thus making the equilibrium less sustainable. However,  $D$  only risks civil war when the domestic stakes are above a certain value ( $\pi > \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T}$ ). The reason why is because when  $\pi$  is too low,  $T$  is highly unlikely to intervene.

When intervention is unlikely,  $R$  is likely going to reject a small offer. Therefore, there has to be a sufficient likelihood of  $T$  intervening for  $D$  to risk civil war with  $R$ .

## 6 Empirical implications

The nested model of domestic and international conflict shows how expectations about intervention and retaliation affect domestic processes. This interaction has clear empirical implications, because when and why domestic bargaining breaks down depends on what happens after fighting breaks out. To show this, I calculate the comparative statics of the probability of civil war (with or without subsequent intervention and retaliation), which is the probability of rebels rejecting a low offer from the domestic government.<sup>15</sup> All equilibria offer substantively different predictions on key parameters, and several have non-monotonic effects. The varying predictions depend on the two dimensions of interest: retaliation and rebel aims. Some predictors flip direction depending on whether retaliation is credible or not, but all predictors turn on the aims of the rebels, because when rebels have local aims, the probability of civil war is equivalent to the probability of the third party *not* intervening.

The risk of either interstate war or internationalized civil war increases in the relative size of the local stakes, but only when the rebels have expansive aims. The greater  $\pi$  is, the more the third party has to gain from intervening, and since the rebels prefer help to fighting alone, higher likelihood of intervention means higher likelihood of bargaining breakdown. Conversely, when the rebels have local war aims, countries are at greater risk of civil war when the local stakes are relatively low.

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<sup>15</sup>Because intervention and retaliation follow the onset of a civil war, when I refer to the probability of war, I mean the likelihood of civil war breaking out following a low offer from the domestic government, regardless of what happens afterwards.

Table 1: Probability of war: Increase in size of local stakes

	Credible retaliation	Non-credible retaliation
Local-aims rebels	↓ (Civil war)	↓ (Civil war)
Expansive-aims rebels	↑ (Interstate war)	↑ (Intern. civil war war)

Table 2: Probability of war: Increase in rebel affinity

	Credible retaliation	Non-credible retaliation
Local-aims rebels	↑ (Civil war)	↓ (Civil war)
Expansive-aims rebels	↓ (Interstate war)	↑ (Intern. civil war)

Contrary to existing studies (e.g. Gleditsch 2007, p. 298), the relationship between the rebels and the third party is not a consistent predictor of intervention. Under a credible threat of retaliation, stronger affinity makes interstate war less likely, but civil war more likely. The intuition is as follows: the less the third party likes the rebels, the larger the marginal benefit is of fighting over a large set of stakes than staying out and holding some influence in the event of a rebel victory. Therefore, stronger affinity makes the third party less likely to intervene. However, when the rebels have local aims, stronger affinity makes civil war more likely, because they prefer not to fighting alone. The expectations are reversed when the threat of retaliation is non-credible. Greater affinity makes internationalized civil war more likely when the rebels have expansive aims, but civil war less likely when the rebels have local aims. The intuition is as follows: Because fighting is exclusively in Country *A*'s territory, *T* only cares about whether *R* wins the local conflict. Therefore, the third party's and rebels' goals align as affinity increases. However, when the rebels have local aims, their goals diverge.

The balance of power is important for predicting the onset of civil war (with or without subsequent intervention and/or retaliation), but the effects are conditional on the credibility of retaliation, rebel war aims, and the stakes of the conflict. For instance, under credible retali-

ation, increasingly powerful domestic governments make intervention less likely, as expected, except when  $\pi$  or  $b$  are relatively high, which suggests that there are substitution effects when  $T$  is facing a very strong opponent. The third party prefers fighting weaker governments, but sees intervention as an imperative when the (domestic) stakes are high or it really likes the rebels. Therefore, stronger governments may make interstate war more or less likely, depending on how much is at stake for the third party.<sup>16</sup> Under non-credible retaliation, the effect of  $D$ 's military strength on the likelihood of war is strictly conditional on the balance of power. A stronger  $D$  makes  $T$  more willing to intervene, thus starting an internationalized civil war, unless  $D$  is especially strong. This result implies that  $T$  wants to intervene in order to win the war, unless  $D$  is so strong that intervention does not tip the balance of power in their favor.

Rebel strength is also not a consistent predictor of war. For instance, when the threat of retaliation is credible, stronger rebels make intervention more likely, but only for particularly high values of  $\pi$  and  $b$ , similar to the effect of  $D$ 's military strength.<sup>17</sup> Without retaliation, stronger rebels make the third party less willing to intervene. The logic is as follows:  $T$  is less likely to support stronger rebels than weaker ones because stronger rebels are more likely to win on their own, so they do not need the external support. Therefore, stronger rebels make internationalized civil war less likely, but only when the rebels have expansive aims. When the rebels have local aims, stronger rebels make civil war more likely, because they make intervention less likely.

These predictions have implications for existing research. For instance, Salehyan et al. (2011, p. 711) argue that medium-strength rebels are more likely to get external support because of

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<sup>16</sup>Conversely, when the rebels have local war aims, the direction of these effects flip, so when  $T$  has much to gain, civil war becomes less likely relative to peace.

<sup>17</sup>Rebel aims thus determine what type of conflict is started, as strong rebels make interstate war more likely when the local stakes and chances of winning are high (expansive aims), but civil war less likely (local aims).

supply-and-demand dynamics. By incorporating the threat of retaliation, I show that third parties do not strictly prefer supporting stronger rebels. Third parties make decisions based on the chances of winning, but also the costs of doing so, particularly in the shadow of retaliation, and the stakes at hand. Furthermore, by endogenizing rebel preferences in the model, I show how varying stakes affect the alignment of rebel and third-party preferences, which helps predict both the onset of civil war and intervention.

The results presented here imply selection bias in our observational data. Civil war might not break out because the opposition has no interest in picking up arms, or because the government has successfully deterred a third party from intervening and the opposition prefers fighting an interstate war to fighting over the local stakes. Similarly, civil war might break out, but without intervention, for at least two reasons: the third party might simply not have an interest in the conflict; or the rebels prefer fighting on their own and the third party is successfully deterred from intervening. Thus, modeling dyadic relations alone does not capture the strategic interaction.

## **7 Conclusion**

This paper has presented an asymmetric information model of civil war onset, intervention, and retaliation with varying stakes for fighting to help explain why some civil wars expand while others do not. I focused on uncertainty about the third party's costs of intervention in order to isolate an international cause of civil war onset and expansion. Furthermore, I linked domestic and international conflict by allowing the domestic government to raise the stakes of fighting through retaliation, and I allowed the rebels to hold varying preferences over external support.

These modeling decision allowed me to examine how all three actors' preferences on maintaining or remaking political order affect conflict behavior.

The model thus explains when civil wars become interstate wars. Some of the key takeaway results are:

- Interstate war occurs when (a) the local stakes are moderately high, (b) the costs of fighting are low, and (c) the domestic government has some retaliatory capabilities.
- For interstate war to occur, the rebels' and the third party's incentives to fight have to be sufficiently aligned.
- Higher local stakes make internationalized civil war more likely, conditional on a civil war having broken out, but makes it less likely that a civil war starts in the first place.
- Higher local stakes make internationalized civil war more likely relative to interstate war, and vice-versa.

This nested model of conflict helps explain several cases of expansion and non-expansion, and how the costs and benefits of retaliation affect decision-making. Furthermore, if we extend the logic of the model, we can see how exogenous shocks to a domestic conflict can have unanticipated effects. For instance, by raising the local stakes in Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion in 1979 both made intervention on the side of the rebels more appealing and the threat of retaliation less credible. Today, we observe a similar dynamic in Syria, where regime supporters, such as Russia and Iran, have encouraged external support for rebels.

The model also sheds light on the importance of war costs for the actors involved, and the distinction between those borne domestically and those imposed externally. The equilibria

predicting interstate war and internationalized civil war exist under conditions of low costs in the civil war country. If we consider those costs a function of what can be destroyed, then the model hints at a potential explanation for why civil wars cluster spatially in underdeveloped countries and why so many of them tend to attract external interveners. Civil war becomes relatively more attractive for the actors involved when there is less to lose from fighting. This logic extends to war expansion. Intervention, even in the face of a credible threat of retaliation, should be more attractive when the third party has fewer assets to be lost. As such, war costs are not only defined by an attacker's ability to impose costs, but also by a target's vulnerability. Poorer countries might therefore be at an advantage relative to richer ones, when considering the willingness to intervene.

A broader theoretical contribution of my model is that it offers an international and informational explanation for civil war onset. Uncertainty over intervention can disrupt domestic bargaining, and we might think of some civil wars as products of their international circumstances, rather than exclusively domestic processes. Existing empirical work suggests that treating interstate and intrastate wars separately is analytically problematic (Cunningham and Lemke 2013, p. 617), and my model provides a link between the two by showing how actors can transition from one to the other.

Another important insight provided by the model is that there is no consistent relationship between many common predictors of civil war and the onset of fighting. I show that the effect of rebel-intervener ties and relative military strength on the probability of war depend on the credibility of the threat of intervention and rebel war aims. Consistent with existing explanations for interstate war (Powell 1999, e.g.), power imbalance is not sufficient to explain war. These results imply that there is selection bias in the observational data we use, and failing to account for the

strategic interaction may lead to biased estimates when predicting conflict outcomes.

Future research should focus on the specific characteristics of expansion, across space and time. I have assumed that escalation means interstate war, but retaliation might be of less severity. The variation in expansion should affect outcomes of interest, such as duration. One can imagine sudden expansion having a different effect on civil war termination than a gradual escalation, but both the choice of intervention strategy and retaliation might interact in ways not captured by the model presented here. The civil wars in Afghanistan and Syria show how strategies change over time, in response to both changes on the ground and external factors.

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## 8 Appendix

### 8.1 Proposition 1

Interstate war happens with some positive probability when the value of the size of the local stakes is in some intermediary range. Specifically, for the equilibrium to exist, there is a lower and an upper bound of  $\pi$ . The lower bound is defined by  $T$ 's willingness to intervene despite it triggering retaliation and interstate war. It prefers interstate war to staying out when

$$\frac{m_R+m_T}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_T - e_T \geq \frac{b\pi m_R}{m_D+m_R} + (1 - \pi), \text{ which can be simplified to } \pi \geq \frac{c_T + \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} + e_T}{1 - \frac{bm_R}{m_D+m_R}} = \tau^*.$$

This constraint is more likely to hold the lower  $T$ 's war costs and escalation costs are ( $c_T$  and  $e_T$ ).

The upper bound of  $\pi$  is defined either by  $D$ 's willingness to retaliate or  $R$ 's war aims, depending on which is the stronger constraint as expressed by the local stakes. The threat of retaliation is credible when  $\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_D - e_D \geq \frac{\pi m_D}{m_D+m_R+wm_T} - c_D$ , which can be rewritten as  $\pi \leq \frac{\left(\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - e_D\right)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{m_D} = \delta$ . This constraint holds for smaller values  $D$ 's escalation costs ( $e_D$ ).

$R$  prefers fighting an interstate war to fighting alone in a civil war when  $\pi$  is sufficiently low. Specifically,  $R$  has expansive aims when the offer from  $D$  equivalent to what it gets in an interstate war is greater or equal to the offer it would get in the event of civil war without intervention,

$$-\frac{\frac{a}{b} + c_R + \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - 1}{\pi} \geq \frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R} - \frac{c_R}{\pi}, \text{ which we can rewrite as } \pi \leq \frac{(-m_D - m_R)((a-b)(m_R+m_T) + am_D)}{bm_R(m_D+m_R+m_T)} = \rho^*.$$

This inequality holds the the smaller  $R$ 's autonomy costs are ( $a$ ).

Formally, the constraints hold jointly when  $\tau^* < \min\{\delta, \rho^*\}$ . Because the lower and upper bounds on  $\pi$  do not share  $c_T$ ,  $e_T$ ,  $c_D$ , and  $a$ , the inequality holds when one or more of these parameters are sufficiently low. For instance, if  $\rho^* < \delta$ , then the following must be true:  $e_T \leq$

$$\frac{m_D(a(b-2)m_R+(b-a)m_T)+(b-1)(a-b)m_R(m_R+m_T)-am_D^2}{bm_R(m_D+m_R+m_T)} - c_T.$$

Whether war breaks out or not depends on the offer  $D$  makes in equilibrium. Because  $D$  knows  $R$ 's decision-rules, it knows the minimum offers it can make that  $R$  will accept conditional on whether  $T$  is intervening. When intervention is coming,  $R$  gets  $(\frac{m_R+m_T}{m_D+m_R+m_T})\pi - c_R - \frac{a}{b}$ , so it will not accept anything less than  $x_{\text{inter}} = \frac{\frac{m_R+m_T}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - \frac{a}{b} - c_R}{\pi}$ . When intervention is not coming, the best  $R$  can get fighting a civil war alone is  $(\frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R})\pi - \frac{c_R}{\pi}$ , so the minimum it will accept from  $D$  is  $x_{\text{local}} = \frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R} - \frac{c_R}{\pi}$ . Because  $R$  has expansive aims ( $x_{\text{inter}} > x_{\text{local}}$ ),  $R$  will always accept the former, but only the latter when intervention is not coming.

Therefore, there are two potential offers  $D$  can make. It knows that  $x_{\text{inter}}$  will be accepted for sure, because it satisfies  $R$  for all types  $T$ , but it will offer  $x_{\text{local}}$  when the expected utility of making a low offer outweighs the additional costs of offering  $x_{\text{inter}}$ . It decides between the two offers depending on the probability of  $T$  intervening.  $T$  is indifferent at cut point  $\hat{z} = m_D \left( \frac{b\pi}{m_D+m_R} - \frac{1}{m_D+m_R+m_T} \right) - b\pi - e_T + p$ , and because the types are uniformly distributed, the probability of intervention is  $\frac{\hat{z}}{\bar{z}}$  with the complementary of non-intervention being  $\frac{\bar{z}-\hat{z}}{\bar{z}}$ . Thus,  $D$  risks war with a small offer when:

$$\frac{\hat{z} \left( \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_D - e_D \right)}{\bar{z}} + \frac{(\bar{z} - \hat{z}) (\pi(1 - x_{\text{local}}))}{\bar{z}} \geq \pi(1 - x_{\text{inter}}). \quad (1)$$

Because solving the above for  $\pi$  involves multiple solutions, I rewrite the inequality as:

$$\begin{aligned}
a \leq & \frac{b}{\bar{z}} \left( - \frac{(m_D(c_D + c_R + e_D + \pi) + m_R(c_D + c_R + e_D))(m_D(\pi - e_T) - m_R((b-1)\pi + e_T))}{(m_D + m_R)^2} \right. \\
& + \bar{z} \left( \frac{\pi m_D}{m_D + m_R} - \pi + 1 \right) - \frac{m_D^2}{(m_D + m_R + m_T)^2} + \\
& \left. \frac{m_D(m_R(-\bar{z} - b\pi + c_D + c_R + e_D - e_T + \pi) + m_D(-\bar{z} + c_D + c_R + e_D - e_T + 2\pi))}{(m_D + m_R)(m_D + m_R + m_T)} \right) \\
& = \gamma^*
\end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

This constraint implies that risking war becomes increasingly attractive the smaller  $R$ 's autonomy costs become because it makes the larger offer less attractive relative to risking war with a smaller offer. As noted above, the constraint on  $R$ 's war aims also hold for smaller values of  $a$ , so we are more likely to see both  $D$  risking war and  $R$  have expansive aims the smaller the autonomy loss is.

I have now shown that  $D$  can make two offers in equilibrium, and for some values of  $a$  it risks war. However, because interstate war means raising the stakes of the conflict, we have to make sure that  $D$  will not knowingly provoke war by offering something it know will be rejected. In equilibrium,  $D$  will never do so, and the reason why is straightforward. When  $D$  offers  $x_{\text{local}}$ , which is the smaller offer, interstate war occurs with some probability while  $R$  accepts with complementary probability. If it offers less than that, interstate war happens with the same probability, but instead of  $R$  accepting with complementary probability, civil war breaks out. Therefore, provoking war in equilibrium would imply:

$$\frac{\hat{z} \left( \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_D - e_D \right)}{\bar{z}} + \frac{(\bar{z} - \hat{z}) (\pi(1 - x_{\text{local}}))}{\bar{z}} \leq \frac{\hat{z} \left( \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_D - e_D \right)}{\bar{z}} + \frac{\bar{z} - \hat{z} \left( \left( \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R} \right) \pi - c_D \right)}{\bar{z}}, \quad (3)$$

which can be simplified as  $\pi(1 - x_{\text{local}}) < \left( \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R} \right) \pi - c_D$ , or  $\left( \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R} \right) \pi + c_R < \left( \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R} \right) \pi - c_D$ ,

which is by assumption never true.

## 8.2 Proposition 2

When  $D$  cannot credibly threaten to retaliate and  $R$  has expansive war aims, breakdown in bargaining leads to internationalized civil war. In this PBE, the lower bound of  $\pi$  is defined by the non-credible retaliation,  $T$ 's incentive to intervene, and  $R$ 's expansive war aims. For retaliation not to be credible,  $\pi$  must be greater than  $\delta$ . When that is the case, the inequalities for both  $T$  and  $R$  change.  $T$  prefers fighting an internationalized civil war to staying out when

$$\frac{b\pi(m_R+wm_T)}{m_D+m_R+wm_T} - c_T + (1-\pi) \geq \frac{b\pi m_R}{m_D+m_R} + (1-\pi), \text{ which can be simplified to } \pi \geq \frac{c_T(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{bwm_Dm_T} =$$

$\tau^\dagger$ . Under non-credible retaliation,  $R$  has expansive aims when  $-\frac{a}{b\pi} - \frac{c_R}{\pi} - \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+wm_T} + 1 \geq$

$$\frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R} - \frac{c_R}{\pi}, \text{ which simplifies to } \pi \geq \frac{a(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}{bwm_Dm_T} = \rho^\dagger. \text{ Formally, } \pi > \max\{\delta, \tau^\dagger, \rho^\dagger\}$$

has to be true, and which lower bound is more restrictive depends on  $e_D$ ,  $c_T$ ,  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $w$ .

These bounds suggest that the PBE is more likely to exist for higher values of  $\pi$ . However, since  $R$  prefers intervention to non-intervention, the higher  $\pi$  is, the more likely intervention is. Specifically, the cut point for  $T$ 's indifference between intervening or not is  $\hat{y} = \frac{b\pi w m_D m_T}{(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)}$ , and with the uniform distribution of types, the probability of war is  $\frac{\hat{y}}{\bar{y}}$ , and the complementary probability of non-intervention being  $\frac{\bar{y}-\hat{y}}{\bar{y}}$ . As with the previous proposition,  $D$  can make a small offer or a large offer. In this case, a small offer is  $x_{\text{local}}$ , while the larger

offer is  $x_{\text{interciv}} = 1 - \frac{a}{b\pi} - \frac{c_R}{\pi} - \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+wm_T}$ , which is the equivalent of what  $R$  will get if an internationalized civil war breaks out. Therefore, for  $D$  to risk war, the following inequality has to hold:

$$\frac{\hat{y} \left( \frac{\pi m_D}{m_D+m_R+wm_T} - c_D \right)}{\bar{y}} + \frac{(\bar{y} - \hat{y}) (\pi(1 - x_{\text{local}}))}{\bar{y}} \geq \pi(1 - x_{\text{interciv}}) \quad (4)$$

can solve the inequality for  $a$ , so that the following has to be true:

$$b \left( \frac{\frac{\pi(\bar{y}-\hat{y})m_D}{m_D+m_R+wm_T} - \hat{y}(c_D + c_R) - \frac{\pi\hat{y}m_D}{m_D+m_R}}{\bar{y}} + c_R + \frac{\pi m_D}{m_D + m_R} \right) \geq a = \gamma^\ddagger. \quad (5)$$

Since  $\rho^\dagger$  is the only other constraint with  $a$ , I can rewrite that as  $a \leq \frac{bpwm_Dm_T}{(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+wm_T)} = \alpha^\ddagger$ .

For the PBE to exist then,  $a < \min\{\gamma^\ddagger, \alpha^\ddagger\}$  has to be true along with the constraint for  $\pi$ . As with the above equilibria,  $D$  will not knowingly provoke a war because it prefers  $R$  accept  $x_{\text{interciv}}$  to fighting an internationalized civil war.

### 8.3 Lemma 4.1

When escalation to interstate war no longer means that  $R$  and  $T$  are fighting in a coalition together, interstate war does not happen in equilibrium. For  $T$  to intervene, it has to prefer fighting an interstate war alone to sitting out a civil war, meaning  $\frac{m_T}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - c_T - e_T \geq \frac{b\pi m_R}{m_D+m_R} + (1 - \pi)$  has to be true. This inequality can be rewritten as  $\pi \geq \frac{c_T + \frac{m_D+m_R}{m_D+m_R+m_T} + e_T}{1 - \frac{bm_R}{m_D+m_R}} = \tau^*$ .

For  $R$  to have expansive aims under free-for-all-fighting, they have to prefer fighting an interstate war, against two opponents, over fighting a civil war against  $D$  alone. Specifically,

$$-\frac{\frac{a}{b} + c_R - \frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R+m_T}}{\pi} > \frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R} - \frac{c_R}{\pi}, \text{ which can be rewritten as } \pi \leq \frac{(m_D+m_R) \left( \frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R+m_T} - \frac{a}{b} \right)}{m_R} = \rho^*. \text{ These}$$

two inequalities are never jointly true under the assumptions set out in the model. We can see



that by checking whether  $\frac{(m_D+m_R)\left(\frac{m_R}{m_D+m_R+m_T}-\frac{a}{b}\right)}{m_R} > \frac{c_T+\frac{m_D+m_R}{m_D+m_R+m_T}+e_T}{1-\frac{bm_R}{m_D+m_R}}$  is ever true, leaving some positive range of  $\pi$  for the PBE to exist. However, the inequality reduces down to

$$b(m_D+m_R)\left((m_D+m_R)(m_R(a+b(c_T+e_T))+am_D)+b^2m_R\right) < 0, \quad (6)$$

which is by assumption never true. As such, there is no range of values for  $\pi$  in which  $R$  has expansive aims and  $T$  prefers fighting an interstate war over staying out when the two do not fight in a coalition together. Furthermore, if I remove the autonomy-loss term from  $R$ 's utility function, given that they should not incur any such cost under free-for-all, the inequalities still do not hold at the same time.

#### 8.4 Proposition 3

When  $D$  can credibly threaten to retaliate but  $R$  has local war aims, the war outcome in equilibrium is civil war. As above, this PBE exists for some intermediary values of  $\pi$ , but now the lower bound is defined by  $R$ 's war aims. If it is too low, then interstate war will become too attractive. The upper bound of  $\pi$  is defined by  $T$ 's willingness to stay out of the conflict (if it is too high, then intervention becomes too attractive) or  $T$ 's ability to credibly retaliate. As such, the following must hold:  $\rho^* < \min\{\delta, \tau^*\}$ .

If  $\tau^* < \delta$ , then  $\frac{c_T+\frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T}+e_T}{1-\frac{bm_R}{m_D+m_R}} > \frac{(-m_D-m_R)((a-b)(m_R+m_T)+am_D)}{bm_R(m_D+m_R+m_T)}$  must be true for the PBE to exist. Higher values of  $b$  make both intervention and local aims less likely, but the inequality holds for higher values of  $c_T$  and  $e_T$  because  $T$  is deterred from intervening and higher values of  $a$  because intervention becomes too costly for  $R$ .

As in Proposition 1,  $D$  only makes two offers in equilibrium, but in this PBE  $x_{\text{local}} > x_{\text{inter}}$ , so

the latter comes with the risk of civil war.  $D$  will offer  $x_{\text{inter}}$  when the expected utility of risking civil war is greater than the cost of buying off  $R$  with  $x_{\text{local}}$ , which depends on the likelihood of  $T$  intervening. In contrast with Proposition 1, the risk of  $R$  rejecting the smaller offer is inversely proportionate to the likelihood of  $T$  intervening:

$$\frac{\hat{z}(\pi(1 - x_{\text{inter}}))}{\bar{z}} + \frac{(\bar{z} - \hat{z})(\pi(\frac{m_D}{m_D + m_R}) - c_D)}{\bar{z}} \geq \pi(1 - x_{\text{local}}). \quad (7)$$

Because increased values of  $\pi$  makes both risking war and offering  $x_{\text{inter}}$  increasingly attractive, I rewrite the above inequality as  $a \geq \gamma^\dagger$ , which suggests that increased autonomy loss for  $R$  makes  $D$  more likely to risk war. For  $R$  to have local war aims,  $a$  has to be sufficiently high, so I rewrite  $\pi > \rho^\star$  as  $a > \alpha^\star$ . For the PBE to exist,  $a$  has to be sufficiently high, or  $a \geq \max\{\gamma^\dagger, \alpha^\star\}$  has to be true. It is for sufficiently low values of  $\bar{z}$ , meaning that when the upper bound of potential destruction for  $T$  is sufficiently low, it is relatively more likely to intervene. In other words, when intervention is sufficiently likely, the inequality holds and the PBE exists. As with Proposition 1,  $D$  never knowingly provokes war because it strictly prefers  $R$  accepting  $x_{\text{inter}}$  to fighting an interstate war.

Civil war also happens in equilibrium when  $D$  cannot credibly threaten to retaliate and the rebels have local aims. This PBE is similar to the one described in Proposition 3, except since retaliation is no longer credible,  $D$ 's strategy imposes a lower bound on  $\pi$ . Specifically,  $\pi \geq \delta$  has to be true. Since civil war breaks out when  $R$  has local war aims and rejects a low offer when  $T$  is not intervening, the equilibrium has an upper bound on  $\pi$ . Therefore,  $\delta \leq \min\{\tau^\dagger, \rho^\dagger\}$  has to be true for the equilibrium to exist. This constraint holds for higher values of  $e_D$ ,  $c_T$ , and  $a$ , and lower values of  $b$ . For instance, if  $R$ 's war aims is a stronger constraint than  $T$ 's

non-intervention ( $\tau^\dagger > \rho^\dagger$ ), which it is when  $a$  is less than  $c_T$ , then  $\delta \leq \rho^\dagger$  is true when either  $e_D$  or  $a$  are sufficiently high. When  $e_D \geq \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T}$ ,  $a$  simply has to be positive, which it is by assumption. If  $e_D < \frac{m_D}{m_D+m_R+m_T}$ , then  $a > -\frac{bwm_T(e_D(m_R+m_T)+(e_D-1)m_D)}{(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+m_T)}$ . These constraints therefore hold when  $T$  is successfully deterred from intervening.

Civil war breaks out when  $D$  offers  $R$   $x_{\text{interciv}}$ , but  $T$  is not intervening. Therefore, the probability of war is the inverse of the probability of intervention. For  $D$  to risk war, the following has to be true:

$$\frac{(\bar{y} - \hat{y}) \left( \frac{\pi m_D}{m_D+m_R} - c_D \right)}{\bar{y}} + \frac{\hat{y}(\pi(1 - x_{\text{interciv}}))}{\bar{y}} \geq \pi(1 - x_{\text{local}}). \quad (8)$$

I can rewrite this inequality as  $a \geq b \left( \frac{\bar{y}(c_D+c_R)}{\hat{y}} - c_D - c_R + \frac{\pi w m_D m_T}{(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+w m_T)} \right) = \gamma^*$ . This constraint therefore holds for higher values of  $a$  because it makes risking war more attractive by making  $x_{\text{interciv}}$  larger. For  $R$  to have local war aims,  $\pi \leq \rho^\dagger$ , which can be rewritten as  $a \geq \frac{b\pi w m_D m_T}{(m_D+m_R)(m_D+m_R+w m_T)}$ , has to be true. Therefore, for  $D$  to risk war and the equilibrium to exist,  $R$ 's autonomy loss has to be sufficiently high. As with the previous propositions,  $D$  will not knowingly provoke war, because it strictly prefers  $R$  accepting  $x_{\text{interciv}}$  to fighting an internationalized civil war.