Major Power Status (In)Consistency and Political Relevance in International Relations Studies

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Abstract

Political relevance is frequently used as a sample selection criterion to limit massive data frames where most dyads have little or no probability of interaction. Several studies have shown that political relevance may introduce bias in both sample composition and empirical findings (Maoz, 1996; Lemke and Reed 2001; Benson 2005; Hewitt and Goertz 2005; Quackenbush 2006; Bennett 2006; Braumoeller and Carson 2011). To reduce such bias, scholars have proposed different definitions of political relevance, but major power status appears in almost all of them. This practice may be problematic for two reasons. First, authors often use major power status as a proxy for capabilities, while status itself may have an effect separate from capabilities. Second, popular operationalizations of major power status ---including the Correlates of War classification--- treat all great power states as having equal status and, consequently, as being equally predisposed towards various political behaviors and interactions. We suggest that, instead, the opportunity and willingness for political action vary among great powers as a function of their status consistency. Using the classification developed in Volgy et al. (2011), we propose that (1) major power states differ in their baseline probability for political (inter)action based on whether they are status consistent, status inconsistent overachievers, or status inconsistent underachievers and, therefore, that (2) politically relevant dyads may differ depending on the status consistency of the major power they contain. Using the 1950-2001 period as our empirical domain, we explore the implications of selecting politically relevant dyads based status (in)consistency for studies on conflict onset, conflict joining, conflict management (mediation) and foreign intervention.

International Relations (IR) scholars often enjoy the advantage of working with the entire universe of cases of interest rather than with samples. Depending on the variables of interest, we luckily have access to approximately 200 years worth of data on states and their interactions in the modern state-system. The large temporal domain of state-level data, coupled with the popularity of dyadic research designs, have led analysts to generate data sets that can easily exceed one million cases. While such data availability is a blessing in many respects, it also has created considerable computational and theoretical issues. Biased empirical results may emerge from the investigation of rare occurrences ---such as interstate conflicts--- with data sets in which most observations are non-events and which include cases that realistically are unlikely to experience the phenomenon of interest.

To reduce the hidden risks associated with extremely large data sets and few occurrences of the dependent variable, IR scholars have developed the notion of "political relevance." States or pairs of states (dyads) are politically relevant if they have a realistic chance of engaging in some political behavior of interest and, particularly, in various forms of international conflict. Being a great power, being geographically proximate to another state or event and, sometimes being involved in a military alliance lead states to having sufficient opportunity and willingness to engage in the behavior under investigation. Focusing only on politically relevant states or dyads allows researchers to drop several hundred thousands of potentially "unimportant" cases from their data sets, thereby reducing the risk of biased results. However, resort to political relevance is not without consequences. One drawback of political relevance as a case selection device is that researchers lose quite a few cases of states or dyads that experience conflict even though they are neither major powers nor geographically proximate to each other or to an ongoing conflict. Thus, IR scholars have tweaked the defining traits of political relevance in order to make the concept more flexible and avoid the loss of crucial realizations of the dependent variable. In particular, the standards for defining geographical proximity have been

lowered, and scholars have experimented with different thresholds of material capabilities[1] in order to avoid losing states and dyads that have capacity for political action without being major powers (for example, Quackenbush 2006).

While some of these "fixes" may be partially effective, they do not resolve the problem of defining political relevance. Rather, they may introduce as many theoretical and empirical problems as they solve. In this paper we focus in particular on the use of major power status to define political relevance and on the proposed use of capability thresholds for expanding the range of this concept. These case selection strategies share two interconnected problems. First, in international politics major power capabilities and major power status are different attributes that have independent effects on states' behaviors. Using material capabilities as a proxy for major power status in order to capture political relevance not only introduces theoretical confusion, but it also misrepresents the independent effect that status has on international political behavior. Second, most definitions of political relevance resort to the Correlates of War's definition of major power status which, in addition to having questionable empirical variability,[2] fails to capture differences between major powers.

Rather, we suggest that there are difference between major powers with regard to status consistency, and that such differences have an impact on states' opportunity and willingness for political action -and, therefore, on political relevance. The principal difference is between status consistent and status inconsistent major powers. A secondary, but equally important, distinction is between status overachieving and status underachieving major powers. We apply the concept of major power status (in)consistency to the identification of politically relevant dyads with the aim of exploring

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1   IR scholars conventionally employ the Correlates of War (COW) index known as the Cumulative Index of National Capabilities (CINC) to measure states' material capabilities and their capacity for political action (Singer, Bremer and Stuckey 1972; Singer 1988).

2   For instance, in modern times, China is included by COW as having major power status starting in 1950 and through a period or enormous weakness in Chinese capabilities and lack of assertiveness outside its immediate neighborhood. Historically, Italy is included as having major power status far beyond its capabilities and successes in international politics

the existence of status-based differences in the propensity for political action, especially in terms of conflict behavior. After briefly reviewing the literature on political relevance, we elaborate on the theoretical distinction between major power status consistency and inconsistency. We investigate the empirical implications of such a distinction on the selection of political relevant dyads for the study on conflict onset and conflict intervention for the 1950-2001 period.

1 Political Relevance: Origins, Definitions, and Use

Weede (1976) is often credited with the introduction of the concept of "political-military relevance" in his attempt to identify dyads with a realistic chance to fight. Weede included the existence of latent territorial conflict between two states, geographical contiguity, and the presence of of a major power state in the dyad as the three determinants of political relevance. In later works (Weede 1983), he differentiated between "strategically interdependent" dyads -those that were geographically contiguous or contained a major power state- and politically relevant dyads -those that were strategically interdependent or had latent territorial conflict.

Arguably, political relevance was popularized by Maoz and Russett (1993) in what is now the most cited article in the field. In their study of normative causes of the democratic peace, Maoz and Russett focused on the 1946-1986 empirical domain and began working with a data set of about 265,000 dyad-years. Noting that the majority of dyads in their data set did not have a realistic probability to experience conflict, Maoz and Russett decided to drop from their analysis all dyads that were not contiguous or did not include a major power state. Their decision was based on Bremer's (1992) now classic work on dyads and on his finding that contiguity and major-power involvement are the two most common, "static" factors affecting the likelihood of war. This definition of political relevance allowed Maoz and Russett to retain only 12% of the original dyad-years and, at the same time, about 74% of all Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) for the post-World War II period (Maoz

and Russett 1993, 627).[3] Their definition of political relevance has become the "standard" definition used in the discipline.

Nonetheless, this definition has been taken to task for its inability to distinguish between global major powers and regional powers: the latter have relatively limited capacity for power projection outside their region but display considerable willingness and opportunity to fight within their region. In an attempt to capture the contribution of regional powers to the occurrence of conflict, Maoz (1996) and Lemke (2002), respectively, redefine political relevance in terms of a "politically relevant international environment (PRIE)" and "relevant neighborhood." Similarly Quackenbush (2006) modifies Maoz's definition of regional powers and relabels political relevance as "political activity." His defining characteristics of politically active dyads are contiguity, presence in a dyad of a global or regional power, and alliance ties with a contiguous disputant, with a regional power, or with a global power.

The goal of such variations in the definition of political relevance is to recover the 25-percent of interstate disputes lost to the analysis when politically irrelevant dyads are eliminated from the data set. The concern is whether dropping about one-quarter of all occurrences introduces bias in the empirical analysis of conflict data. In this regard, findings are mixed. Lemke and Reed (2001), for example, uncover a negligible bias in models predicting conflict onset when only politically relevant dyads are used and conclude that retrospective sampling (King and Zeng 2001) may be a more effective alternative to *a priori* case selection. Bennett (2006) also investigates how many instances of conflict onsets ---disputes and wars--- and conflict joining are captured by lowering the thresholds of geographic distance and major power for the entire 1816-2001 period. In his analysis, expanding the notion of distance beyond direct contiguity and up to 3,000 miles produces the greatest gains, allowing

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3   For a definition of Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs), see Jones, Bremer and Singer (1996) and Ghosn, Palmer and Bremer (2004).

researchers to include all war onsets and roughly 98% of dispute onsets, while using about 39% of all dyad-years.

Less visible gains emerge from modifying the notion of major-power dyad, which Bennett (2006) accomplishes by lowering the capability threshold of the least powerful of the major power states identified according to the Correlates of War definition (Singer 1988).[4] Noting that the original notion of political relevance refers to major power status rather than capabilities, Quackenbush (2006) expands the subset of politically active dyads by including both global and regional powers, as defined by Maoz (1996). Looking at dispute-dyad-years, he estimates that his notion of political activeness captures 95 percent of all instances of conflict participation in comparison to the 88 percent captured by political relevance and 86 percent captured by Maoz's idea of PRIE (Quackenbush 2006: 47).

While only a handful of authors have "tampered" with the operationalization of political relevance, the number of studies that have employed "political relevance", or a variant thereof, is extremely high. A simple Jstor query reveals almost 400 articles appearing in Political Science and IR during the last few decades which employ some definition of politically relevant dyads. Most of these articles deal with conflict onset and some variant of democratic peace theory, but scholars refer to political relevance to study other topics, including territorial conflict and ethnic conflict, rivalries, foreign intervention and the use of force in foreign policy, third party intervention (mediation) and conflict management, and democratization.

Beyond its empirical implications, the theoretical import of political relevance lies in its connection to the well-known "opportunity and willingness" framework (Most and Starr 1989) and in the identification of the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for international interaction and, especially for conflict. However defined, political relevance is used with the objective of distinguishing dyads based on whether they have some non-zero, realistic opportunity to interact and

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4   We expand on the specifics of this definition in the following section.

sufficient willingness to do so. Braumoeller and Carson (2011) contend that the opportunity and willingness inherent in the concept of political relevance could actually be modeled instead of using political relevance as a blunt instrument for excluding thousands and thousands of potentially interesting cases. They model political relevance with the familiar notions of distance, major power status and contiguity. Their methodologically nuanced analysis allows them to conclude that the impact of major power status on conflict initiation decreases significantly with distance, to the point that "at great distances even major powers may be marginally relevant at best" (Braumoeller and Carson 2011: 308). Similarly, Clark and Reagan (2003) and Xiang (2010) essentially argue for a modeling approach to political relevance and, although they resort to different estimation techniques, they both rely on the canonical major power-contiguity-distance-alliance definition of political relevance.

Whether their concern is purely empirical or theoretical, scholars have adopted ---sometimes unconditionally--- the same defining factors in both modeling approaches and direct identification approaches to political relevance. Distance and contiguity are usually taken to express opportunity, whereas alliance ties and major power status are generally said to capture willingness. Yet, while distance, contiguity and alliances are relatively straightforward concepts, both definitionally and operationally, major power status is a more elusive notion. Conceptually, there is an overall lack of clarity in the discipline as to what constitutes status. Operationally, most approaches to political relevance rely on the Correlates of War's (COW) measure of major power status, which contains considerable ambiguity, and which has considerable limitations. Some of these ambiguities and limitations pertain to: (1) a fairly unsystematic and unreliable approach to the identification of major power status; (2) lack of both cross-sectional and longitudinal variation in the variable; (3) the possible endogeneity between major power status and political relevance, as some of the behavior likely to occur in politically relevant dyads may actually define states with major power status; and (4) the

possibility that both opportunity and willingness ---rather than willingness alone--- may define major power states. We grapple with some of these ambiguities in the following section and offer an alternative definition of major power status, which then leads us to reconsider the definition and measurement of politically relevance.

2 Major Power Status and Political Relevance

Systematic definitions and measurements of major power status are hard to come by in the empirical IR literature. The COW measure of major power status, arguably the "gold standard" in quantitative analysis of conflict, is only twice briefly defined by Small and Singer (1982) and Singer (1988) as resulting from a survey of experts in history and diplomacy who were asked which states may have been identified as major powers by other states in different time periods. No clear definition of what the survey respondents should look for in a major power state is offered, and there is no explanation of how the variable should be updated over time. Unsurprisingly the resulting variable shows no cross-sectional variation -all major powers of an era are considered identical- and very little longitudinal variation -only a handful of states permanently lose or acquire status in the COW data. In addition, there is ambiguity as to whether these states are defined by the possession of certain traits, by exhibiting behavior that may lead others to consider them major powers -high levels of international interactions and conflict, for example- or by both. If, in fact, major power status is defined by both attributes and behavior, it is possible that such behavior may be exactly what IR scholars try to explain when they isolate politically relevant dyads, thus producing potential for endogeneity between political relevance and the phenomenon of interest.

We suggest an alternative measure of major power status that relies on systematic indicators to define the great powers of an era. Similarly to the COW indicator, our suggested measure rests on the assumption that members of the international system look at the same attributes we look at when they

consider which states should be attributed major power status.[5] Our measure originates from Levy's

(1983) conceptualization of major powers as states that have an expansive foreign policy agenda, have

the means to pursue their foreign policy objectives at great distance from their home base, and are

attributed special status by other members of the international system. We recast Levy's definition into

the aforementioned opportunity and willingness framework and identify a state as a ***major power*** if it:

a) has the opportunity to act as one through unusual capabilities; b) demonstrates its willingness to act

as one by using those capabilities to pursue unusually broad and expansive foreign policies beyond its

own region [independently of other major powers]; and c) is attributed an unusual amount of status by

policy makers of other states within the international community. A state belongs to the major power

club if it meets minimal empirical thresholds on all these dimensions. We discuss the operationalization

process in the next section.

In terms of political relevance, the notion of what it means to be a major power is not

exclusively an expression of willingness, but of both opportunity and willingness. In addition, our

conceptualization highlights the status component of being a major power state. Over the years some

IR scholars have come to consider being a major power as equivalent to having great capabilities (for

example, Ray 2003). Yet, as intended by the founders of COW, "major power" should also capture the

social process of attribution of special status to a few states by members of the state system. As

discussed in Singer (1988), this may lead to discrepancies between the attribution of status and the

possession of capabilities.[6] But it is in these discrepancies, we believe, that the true explanatory

strength of the notion of major power lies.

We side with a growing body of works steeped in Social Identity Theory (SIT) which suggest

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5   This is no small assumption. Yet it is one we share with the COW measure, as we are asked to accept that international
     system members consider the same attributes as the diplomats and historians surveyed by COW. The main difference is
     that we make such attributes explicit.
6   Singer (1988) identifies pre-WWI Austria-Hungary and Italy between the two great wars as countries experiencing a
     mismatch between status and actual capabilities.

that states care and actively seek status attribution both to validate their identity as part of the larger community of states and for pragmatic reasons (see Larson and Shevchenko. 2002, 2010; Mercer 1995; Volgy et al. 2011). Citizens and decision-makers prize major power status attribution as part of their group and national identity. Furthermore, in pragmatic terms, major power status facilitates a state's implementation of its foreign policy as other members of the international system may be more receptive to the action of major power states. In this regard, major power status can be seen as a form of soft power that confers privileges to states who yield it (Sylvan, Graf and Pugliese 1998).

Following SIT, we suggest that status attribution depends on three non-mutually exclusive processes: self-ascription; community attribution; and in-group attribution. Major power states must be willing to actively seek great power status (self-ascription). They must be recognized as having such status by most members of the community of states (community attribution). They also must be attributed such a status by states who already are recognized as major powers (in-group attribution) and who, ultimately, may act as gatekeepers in what we have labeled the "major power club" (Volgy et al. 2011).

However, as noted above, because major power status depends on opportunity, willingness and status attribution, situations arise in which there is a mismatch between status and the material foundations of it. The idea that states may experience status inconsistency dates as far back as Galtung (1964), was indirectly noted by Singer (1988), and seems to be undergoing a "revival" of sort as several authors have noted that concerns with major power status inconsistency have tangible effects for states conflict and cooperation behavior (see, for example, Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Volgy et al. 2011; Wohlforth 2009; Wohlforth and Kang 2009). More specifically, we suggest three types of status conditions for major powers: *status consistent* powers (status attribution parallels major power capabilities and behavior), status *underachievers* (lacking full status proportional to their capabilities and behavior), and status *overachievers* (those that are attributed more status than their capabilities

and/or behavior would warrant).

Among major power states, we expect status consistent major powers to be the most active on the international scene in regard to both cooperative and conflictual behavior since, by definition. They will be the ones with the most extensive foreign policy objectives and the means to pursue them. Emerging theory on status inconsistency and foreign policy behavior suggests that status inconsistent major powers will strive to resolve the mismatch between status attribution and their capability "portfolio" (Wohlforth 2009), but they will do so in different ways. Status underachievers, whose status is less than their capabilities would warrant, will behave more aggressively and will be more willing to engage in conflictual behavior in order to prove they deserve more status.[7] Status overachievers, on the other hand, are attributed more status than they deserve on the basis of their actions or capabilities. We expect them to try to cling to their status without having to reveal the material weaknesses behind it. Their foreign policy behavior will be less conflictual than either status consistent major powers and underachievers. Rather, they will try to "manage" their status through more cooperative forms of foreign policy behavior (Volgy et al. 2011).

From these premises, the implications of status inconsistency on political relevance are rather intuitive. In more traditional operationalizations (as cited above) all politically relevant dyads are created equal and change little over time. Distance and contiguity are in fact constant dyadic attributes; alliance ties tend to be "sticky"; and the COW indicator of major power status is dichotomous and a very persistent measure. When IR scholars tend to introduce some degree of variation they add capabilities to the measure. But because capabilities are conceived as expression of opportunity, willingness ---which is supposed to be captured by major power status--- remains unchanged.

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7   It is important to point out that status underachievers are not aspiring or rising major powers. Underachievers have already been recognized as major powers, but the level of status recognition they receive is below what they deserve on the basis of their capabilities. The distinction between underachieving major powers and aspiring major powers should become more explicit in the following section, where we operationalize the concept and show how one can approach status as a latent continuous attribute.

Bringing status inconsistency and our measurement of major power status into the picture, however, allows us to introduce greater variance in the politically-relevant-dyad subsample not only in terms of opportunity but also in terms of willingness. Not all politically relevant dyads are created equal, as they may differ in their members' propensity for conflict (or cooperation). Such propensity may further change over time because, unlike the COW indicator of major power status, our measure allows countries to transition through different states of status (in)consistency during the temporal domain under consideration. Three subsets of politically relevant dyads are identifiable on the basis of or definition of status and status inconsistency. The first set contains dyads that meet other requirements of political relevance ---contiguity, for the most part--- but in which neither country is major power. Although we do not focus specifically on these dyads, we may expect their likelihood of conflict to be the lowest because it is exclusively a function of opportunity and because contiguity is only a source of cross sectional variation between politically relevant dyads. Paralleling our expectations about conflict behavior and status inconsistency, we expect the second set of dyads -those containing a status consistent major power- to be the most conflict prone of all, and more conflict prone than status inconsistent dyads and, of course, non-relevant dyads. The third set of politically relevant dyads contains status inconsistent major powers. Among these we can hypothesize that those containing a status underachiever will be more conflict prone than those containing status overachievers.[8] In the following section we summarize the operational details of our measure of major

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8 For the time being we ignore potential differences within a fourth set of politically relevant dyads, those containing two major power states. These are what scholars label "major-major" dyads. Within this subset, we encounter several possible combinations of politically relevant dyads which may vary in their intrinsic baseline probability for conflict: consistent-consistent dyads; consistent-overachiever dyads; consistent-underachiever dyads; overachiever-overachiever dyads; underachiever-overachiever dyads; and underachiever-underachiever dyads. Within this subset we know consistent-consistent dyads are few because, during the time period covered by our data, only the US and, for a few years, Japan and the UK, achieve status consistency. Among the remaining dyads, we assume the propensity for conflict to be determined by major powers with the highest levels of willingness and opportunity. Politically relevant dyads containing a status consistent major power should be more likely to experience conflicts than other major-major dyads. When both states are status inconsistent, dyads containing a status underachiever should have a higher baseline for conflict than dyads where both major powers are overachievers. We intend to return to the issue of major-major politically relevant dyads in future studies.

power status inconsistency and we set up an empirical test of its effects on various forms of conflict behavior in politically relevant dyads for the 1950-2001 period.

3 Measuring Major Power Status, Inconsistency, and Political Relevance

As mentioned earlier, the main goal of our broader project is to provide a measure of major power status that is both systematic and that restores the "status component" of major power state. By relying on and revising Levy's (1983) classic definition, we further aim to include in our measurement both the opportunity and the willingness dimension of this key IR concept. The procedure of devising such a measure of major power state involves: (1) establishing minimum thresholds of opportunity, willingness, and status attribution above which members qualify; and 2) differentiating between types of status based on whether states meet such minimum thresholds, and how many of these thresholds they meet.

Based on our prior conceptual definition, having the opportunity to become a major power involves demonstrating both unusual levels of military and economic capabilities, and the ability to utilize those capabilities beyond the regional context in which states reside. Four capabilities are relevant. Simple military size is estimated by measuring states military spending. Military reach ---the ability to project power--- is estimated by looking at military spending per unit, measured as a function of military spending divided by the size of the armed forces. Economic capacity is measured as the size of the economy (GDP). Just like military spending, GDP only captures the "bulk" of a state's economic capabilities. Thus, we also generate a measure of economic reach, which is calculated on the basis of a state's trade, divided by global trade.

To represent willingness to act as a major power we look at unusually high levels of both cooperative and conflictual activity globally. We look at both conflict and cooperative events since

major powers are expected to engage substantially in both forms of activities.[9] Again, this measure only captures a state's "volume" of foreign policy activity. Therefore, we revise this dimension of major

power by looking at states' ability to chart an independent foreign policy path. Independence in foreign policy orientation is measured by matching foreign policy portfolios to the lead major power (U.S.) and requiring substantial divergence from U.S. leadership.[10]

Major powers, while not equal to each other, should distinguish themselves from others states by demonstrating an unusual level of opportunity and willingness to act as major powers. We create a threshold of unusual for the four capability and willingness measures by requiring that the values on these measures exceed by one standard deviation the annual means for all states.

The status dimension of major power is difficult to capture in a systematic manner, since it is likely to be fairly subjective and based on perceptions of policy makers. These perceptions, however, should have observable, behavioral consequences and should result in actions that reflect when states view others as major powers. Two indicators that should reflect symbolically the behavioral consequences of high status perceptions are diplomatic contacts and high level state visits. We measure the attribution of major power status indirectly by looking for unusually high levels (two standard deviations above the mean) of embassies sent to a major power, and a corresponding number of state visits to its capital.[11]

Applying these measures and the standard deviation criteria to the 1951-2010 period (in five-

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9   We use events data from COPDAB (Azar 1980), WEIS (Goldstein 1991), and IDEA (Bond et al. 2003; King and Lowe 2003). Using Goldstein's scale, we separate them into dimensions of conflict and cooperation. We identify as well whether these activities are primarily in the state's region or outside of it.

10 Annual foreign policy profiles are formed by calculating mean foreign policy activity between two states, based on intensity-weighted international events data. Drawing on the concept of structural equivalence, we calculate the level of foreign policy similarity between two states, which is the extent to which two countries act in the same manner towards the same states (Wasserman and Faust 1994). The measure of foreign policy similarity can be interpreted as a correlation coefficient, ranging from highly dissimilar (-1) to highly similar (1).

11 Diplomatic contacts data are from COW's diplomatic exchange data (http://www.correlatesofwar.org/), and DIPCON DATA (http://www.u.arizona.edu/~volgy/data.html). State visits are extracted from the three events data sources noted above. A two standard deviation threshold for both measures minimizes "noise" in the data.

year aggregates), we identify cases above the thresholds where major powers are status consistent, underachievers, or overachievers. Major powers qualify as status consistent when they (a) demonstrate opportunity to be one by consistently crossing the threshold on all four capability measures; (b) demonstrate unusual willingness to act by crossing the one standard deviation threshold on both cooperation and conflict outside their regions, while maintaining relative foreign policy independence from other major powers; and (c) are attributed full status by crossing the thresholds on both diplomatic contacts and state visits. Status underachievers meet criteria on both opportunity and willingness but lack consistency on status attribution. Status overachievers cross thresholds on both status measures but fail to do so consistently across all measures of opportunity and willingness. We report the results in Table 1, where we compare side-by-side the classification emerging from our measure (VCR=Volgy, Corbetta-Rhamey) with the Correlates of War (COW) classification.

Table 1 about here

The first thing to notice in the table is that applying systematic criteria for defining major power leads to non-trivial differences with the COW indicator. Only the United States and the USSR/Russia receive identical classification with both measures. By our measure, the United Kingdom and France experience occasional lapses in major power attribution until they fully recovered from the destruction of WWII. The COW indicator, instead, invariantly classifies them as major powers. While there is some agreement on the status of Japan from 1991 onward, the two indicators disagree with regard to Germany. COW classifies Germany as a major power immediately after reunification; our indicator suggests otherwise. The most dramatic difference, perhaps, concerns the People's Republic of China (PRC), which COW continuously labels as a major power starting in 1950. Our measure, instead, captures the fact that China's material capabilities lagged behind those of other major powers. As a result China is not attributed major power status until 1991.

Looking at status (in)consistency allows our measure of major power status to introduce further

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variation in the measure. Only the US qualifies as a status-consistent major power for the entire temporal domain. The United Kingdom, France, and Japan experience brief stints as status consistent major powers during the 1990s. All other states experience some degree of status inconsistency. The most dramatic findings in this regard concern the USSR/Russia and China. Despite huge material capabilities the USSR never received the "adequate" amount of status attribution during the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and a massive loss of material capabilities, Russia has instead been attributed more status than it deserves, so to speak. A similar situation applies to China whose rising economic and military capabilities are truly impressive but still lag behind those of other major powers. Thus, since the end of the Cold War, China has commanded far more status recognition than her gaps in capabilities would warrant.

Elsewhere we have tackled the issue validity of our measure in comparison with the COW measure, and we refer the reader more interested in the details of the operationalization procedure to those sources (see Volgy et al. 2011). Our interest for this paper is in the substantive differences between various criteria for measuring status. Such differences in classification would be unimportant if they did not have an effect on our explanations of various international relations dynamics. If differences between the two classification schemes exist we should be able to notice them, for example, in the populations of politically relevant dyads they produce. In the following section we use this classification of major powers and their status (in)consistency to identify various types of politically relevant dyads in two data frames consisting of non-directed and directed-dyad years for the 1950-2001 period.[12] We employ the most basic and traditional classification of political relevance. Dyads are considered politically relevant if they are contiguous by land or separated by 150 miles or less of water, and if either member is a major power state (Bennett 2006; Quackenbush 2006).

We first conduct a descriptive comparison between politically relevant dyads obtained from the

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12 The data frame was produced with EUGene software (Bennett and Stam 2000).

traditional definition of major power status with politically relevant dyads obtained from our alternative definition, inclusive of the notion of status inconsistency. We then proceed to conduct a preliminary test of the hypotheses raised above by employing similar (logit) models of dispute onset, war onset, joining behavior, and foreign intervention on the two universes of politically relevant dyads and using standard conflict predictors ---capability ratio, shared alliance, and shared democratic ties.[13] We look at these four different types of militarized events because major power states have been found to be more likely to engage in them. Our data on MID onset are from the Correlates of War's Militarized Interstate Disputes project (Ghosn et al. 2004; Jones et al. 1996). Data on war onset are from COW's Inter-State War data set (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). Data on MID joining are from Corbetta and Dixon (2005), while our data on foreign interventions are from Kisangani and Pickering (2008) and Pearson and Baumann (1993).[14]

4 Findings

Although our data on major power status extend to 2005, we limit the following analysis to the 1950-2001 period due to the availability of some key dependent variables and control variables. Based on the Correlates of War classification of major powers and the above mentioned definition of political relevance, there are 52,977 politically relevant dyads out of a total of 546,178 dyads for this time period, equivalent to 9.7 percent. Of these politically relevant dyads, 39,834 (7.29 percent) are relevant because they contain a major power state. The remaining dyads are relevant only because of

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13 Control variables were generated with the EUGene software (Bennett and Stam 2000). Capability ratio refers to the weakest-to-strongest ratio in a dyad and is based on the Correlates of War's Composite National Capability Index (CINC) (Singer, Bremer and Stuckey 1972; Singer 1988). Shared alliance is a dichotomous variable capturing whether the two members of a dyad share any alliance pact. Shared democratic ties is a dummy variable coded 1 if both members of a dyad are considered mature democracies, scoring 6 or higher on the Polity Index (see Marshall, Jaggers and Gurr 2010).

[14] MID joining refers to third parties' becoming actively involved in an ongoing militarized dispute between two states with the intent to aid one side in the dispute. The term "foreign interventions", instead, applies to outside states' intervention into a target state's territory in the absence of an ongoing interstate conflict. The various objectives behind foreign interventions are listed in Kisangani and Pickering (2008).

geographical contiguity. Our more restrictive classification rules, instead, lead us to identify 44,987

dyads as politically relevant ---or 8.24 percent. But only 27,235 (4.99 percent) are politically relevant

because of the presence of major power state. While geographic contiguity requirement produces

considerable overlap between the two populations, on the basis of status alone we identify 12,599

fewer politically relevant dyads than COW. In our population of politically relevant dyads, 10,968

dyads contain a status consistent major power state and 20,772 contain a status inconsistent major

power state.[15]

Regardless of differences in size between the two populations of politically relevant dyads, do

we see variations in their propensity for important international phenomena and, specifically, conflict?

The greater incidence of conflict is a prerogative of politically relevant dyads because of the

opportunity for conflict created by geographical proximity and because of major powers' greater

willingness and opportunity for militarized action. We classify contiguity exactly as defined in most

studies that use a COW-based classification of political relevance. Thus we expect that any differences

between politically relevant dyads based on our definition of major powers and dyads based on the

COW definition in the occurrence of conflict will be due to differences in the definition of status.

Given the limited number of controls included in each model we are aware that the following findings

carry some degree of bias due to model underspecification. It is important to keep in mind that the goal

of this project is not to model exactly conflict onset or intervention but to explore the potential

implications of case selection based on different definition of status in international politics.

Table 2 below presents a basic frequency comparison of the incidence of various forms of

conflict behavior based on our definition of status and on COW's. Not surprisingly, the number of

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15   Notice that these figures do not add up neatly to produce the "grand totals" of politically relevant dyads mentioned
     earlier because (1) some dyads are considered relevant only as a function of geographical contiguity; (2) some dyads are
     relevant because of both contiguity and presence of a major power state, and (3) some politically relevant dyads contain
     both a status consistent and a status inconsistent major power.

conflict events captured by politically relevant dyads based on our definition is lower across the board than those captured by the less discriminating, traditional definition of political relevance. In some cases ---war onset, for example--- the difference is quite dramatic. These descriptive frequencies offer preliminary support to our expectation that there will be differences in the conflict propensity of status consistent and status inconsistent major powers. China, for example, engages in no conflicts after it enters the major power club as a status inconsistent overachiever in 1991. The number of war and dispute onsets, MID joining, and foreign interventions is consistently larger for politically relevant dyads including a status consistent major powers. As we expected, the number of conflict events is greater for politically relevant dyads containing a status underachiever than for dyads with a status overachiever.

Table 2 about here

The key question, howver, is whether differences in these rates of occurrence of conflictual behavior are statistically and substantively significant. Does it matter at all if we select our sample of politically relevant dyads based on an invariant definition of status or on a more flexible definition that allows for difference between major powers? As mentioned earlier, we address this question by running a series of bare-bone logit models aimed at predicting the occurrence of dispute and war onset, dispute intervention, and foreign intervention. These are clearly under-specified models, but our goal was to identify a minimum set of explanatory variables that are commonly associated with ALL of the conflict events under consideration in order to improve comparability across models. Because of this, at this stage we are not overly concerned with attributing too much meaning to the coefficients emerging from our exploratory models. We are not trying to answer why war occurs or why a country intervenes into another country's domestic politics. Rather, we want to know whether traditional predictors of these phenomena have a different impact as a function of our sample selection criteria, and especially the major power status criterion. We are looking for rather "dramatic" signs that sample

selection based on major power status matters, such as changes in statistical significance or in sign of coefficients that go against the established wisdom in the study of international politics.

Table 3 below shows six logit models predicting the onset of a Militarized Interstate Dispute based on different samples of politically relevant dyads. We highlight the most obvious differences compared to established wisdom. For example, while the effect of democracy and capability ratio on MID onset remains significant and in the expected direction, the impact of alliance ties varies quite strongly across different dyad samples. It is well known that states sharing an alliance tie are less likely to experience a MID, but this effect is more attenuated for major power states because some of them are strategic rivals and because they tend to fight more to begin with. Yet, Table 3 shows that the dampening effect of alliance on dispute onset is significant only if politically relevant dyads are selected on the basis of a more nuanced definition of status. More specifically, and more interestingly, we note that the negative effect of shared alliance ties is significant for dyads containing a status consistent major power or a status inconsistent underachiever. These are the types of major powers more prone to conflict, as we noted earlier, so it is not unsurprising that alliances have a more prominent effect on their likelihood of experiencing a dispute rather than on major power overachievers, who a lower baseline propensity for conflict. Such a difference would be lost if dyads were selected on an unchanging notion of status.

Table 3 about here

On the surface, there are no notable difference across different samples of politically relevant dyads as far as the occurrence of war is concerned –see Table 4. Regardless of how status is defined, equality in capabilities -a capability ratio approximating 1- positively affects the likelihood of war, whereas democracy and alliance ties reduce such likelihood. However, when we later transform regression coefficients into predicted probability -Figure 2- the baseline predicted probability for war is almost twice as high for politically relevant dyads containing a status consistent major power than for

dyads containing status inconsistent major powers.

Table 4 about here

Considerable differences do emerge between various samples of politically relevant dyads with regard to intervention in ongoing disputes. Here, for dyads based on the COW definition of status we see that a large ratio in capabilities has a significant impact on intervention, whereas shared democratic ties have no statically detectable effect. However, a more discriminating definition of major power status shows that the impact of capabilities on intervention is largely driven by the behavior of status inconsistent major powers that appear tend to intervene only when the power ratio is drastically to their advantage. Shared democratic ties now also have a significant negative effect on intervention when we differentiate between status consistent and status inconsistent major powers.

Table 5 about here

Finally, we note differences between samples of politically relevant dyads in the occurrence of foreign intervention, and in particular with regard to effect of alliance ties. Major power states sharing an alliance tie with a target state are more likely to intervene in the target state's domestic politics across the board. Yet, such a finding is driven by the behavior of status inconsistent major powers. We speculate that status consistent major powers have sufficient clout to exercise influence on a country's domestic politics from a distance, without having to intervene directly. Given the descriptive statistics presented in Table 2, we suspect that these results are driven by the action of status inconsistent underachievers. But the number of foreign interventions in the presence of alliance ties is rather limited and, when we parse out cases between underachieving and overachieving major powers, the coefficient for alliance ties loses significance. Nonetheless, such differentiation would not be possible if we adopted a definition of status that considers all major powers to be exactly alike.

Table 6 about here

In addition to assessing whether failure to distinguish between major powers on the basis of

status introduces bias in common findings about conflict, we are interested in verifying our expectations about the varying baseline propensity for conflict behavior between different politically relevant dyads. In Figures 1 through 4, we present predicted probabilities for the occurrence of, respectively, militarized disputes, war, MID joining and foreign interventions across different values of the capability ratio within a dyad. Differences should emerge not just between dyads based on COW definition of status and dyads based on our (VCR) definition, but also between dyads marked by the presence of a status consistent major power and dyads with status inconsistent major powers.

Concerning MID onset, our expectations are confirmed, as the COW classification under-predicts the occurrence of a dispute except at high values of capability ratio (Figure 1). In politically relevant dyads based on the VCR classification, the probability of dispute onset is considerably higher when a status consistent major power is present. For dyads with status inconsistent major powers, the presence of underachieving, more assertive major powers is associated with a greater probability of MID onset. Consistent with our expectation of more prudent foreign policy behavior, dyads containing an overachieving major power have a higher probability of dispute onset only when the capability ratio is largely to the major power's advantage. As capabilities become more equalized, the probability of a militarized dispute grows larger for dyads containing risk-taking, underachieving major powers.

Figure 1 about here

With regard to the onset of war, differences in probabilities between COW-based politically relevant dyads and VCR-based dyads become indistinguishable (Figure 2). However, unlike the coefficients of the logit models, the visual display of predicted probabilities manages to show the difference between the higher probability of war for dyads containing a status consistent major power and dyads with status inconsistent major powers. The distinction between underachieving and overachieving great powers is in our expected direction, and it grows larger as the capability ratio grows, reflecting greater assertiveness and risk-taking by underachiving major powers.

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Figure 2 about here

Concerning intervention in ongoing militarized disputes (Figure 3), dyads with a status consistent major power are dramatically more likely to experience intervention in a MID whereas, for dyads with a status inconsistent major power, the probability of intervention is considerably higher in presence of an underachiever than an overachiever. The only scenario where we see some discrepancy between our expectations and the findings concerns foreign interventions (Figure 4). In this case, quite surprisingly, politically relevant dyads with a major power overachiever are more likely to experience foreign intervention than those containing an underachieving major power across all values of capability ratio. As per the results from Table 6, however, such a difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 3 about here

Figure 4 about here

Conclusions

In any kind of empirical analysis, including the analysis of international politics, the soundness of our findings depends on the characteristics of our samples and the criteria employed in their selection. The "political relevance" standard has emerged as a fairly common sample selection rule in dyadic studies of conflict during the last couple of decades. All of the premises behind the notion of political relevance have been extensively tested and explored ---leading to varying conclusion about the amount of bias, if any, they introduce in our findings--- except for major power status. The definition of major power status commonly used to select politically relevant dyads treats all great powers as if they had the same amount of status and displays little variation over time. We have argued that not all great powers are attributed an equal amount of status and, actually, most states considered to be major powers during the last sixty years have experienced inconsistencies between the status they receive and the material attributes usually associated with status. Moreover, status attribution may change over

time more frequently than suggested by popular indicators of status.

If major powers differ in the amount of status they are attributed, and if status ranking in the state system has behavioral consequences, not all politically relevant dyads selected on the basis of status are identical. If that is the cases, treating them as if no differences existed between them will introduce bias in our analysis. Two sets of observable implications should emerge. First, traditional predictors of various international phenomena, and of international conflict in particular, should have different effects across politically relevant dyads when we draw distinctions on the basis of status. Second, keeping other determinants of political relevance ---geographical contiguity in particular--- constant, the probability of the occurrence of international phenomena such as conflict should vary across dyads as a function of status. More specifically, variations in probability should reflect our expectations about varying degrees of major powers' international engagement as a function of status.

Employing a definition of major power status and status inconsistency we have developed in previous work (Volgy et al. 2011), along with a systematic procedure to capture it, we have shown that variations in status attribution have methodological and substantive consequences for the study of international conflict. A small but growing body of literature is rediscovering the importance of status in IR and explores the behavioral and policy implications of status hierarchies and status inconsistencies in international politics. Although most of it remains theoretical or based on limited case studies, this growing literature brings our attention to the need for a more nuanced definition of status and what it means to be a major power even in quantitative, large-sample research in international relations. We have attempted to bridge the gap between the theory on status and quantitative empirical research on it. More attention to the role of status in international politics, and a more fine-grained definition of major power status are likely to help us correct existing bias in empirical research and can open up new avenues for further research. Furthermore, close attention should also be granted to regional powers and regional status attribution (Cline et al. 2011), which, like

major powers, have important consequences for political relevance between proximate, albeit not always contiguous, clusters of states. While this paper focuses on conflict, status considerations in international politics are likely to influence cooperative behavior as well in international organizations and regimes, in the international economy, and in international law. We intend to explore the intersection of status, status inconsistency, and international cooperation in future iterations of this research project.

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Table 1: Major Power Status Club Membership, Compared to COW Status Designations, Aggregated at Five Year Intervals, 1951-2010.

Time Frame	Major Power and Status Designations													
	US		USSR/Russia		UK		France		Germany		Japan		PRC	
	VCR	COW	VCR	COW	VCR	COW	VCR	COW	VCR	COW	VCR	COW	VCR	COW
1951-55	SC	Yes	SU	Yes	no	Yes	SU	Yes	no	no	no	no	no	Yes
1956-60	SC	Yes	SU	Yes	no	Yes	SU	Yes	no	no	no	no	no	Yes
1961-65	SC	Yes	SU	Yes	SU	Yes	no	Yes	no	no	no	no	no	Yes
1966-70	SC	Yes	SU	Yes	SU	Yes	SU	Yes	no	no	no	no	no	Yes
1971-75	SC	Yes	SU	Yes	no	Yes	SO	Yes	no	no	no	no	no	Yes
1976-80	SC	Yes	SU	Yes	SU	Yes	SO	Yes	no	no	no	no	no	Yes
1981-85	SC	Yes	SU	Yes	SU	Yes	SO	Yes	no	no	no	no	no	Yes
1986-90	SC	Yes	SO	Yes	SU	Yes	SO	Yes	no	no	no	no	no	Yes
1991-95	SC	Yes	SO	Yes	SU	Yes	SC	Yes	no	Yes	SO	Yes	SO	Yes
1996-00	SC	Yes	SO	Yes	SC	Yes	SC	Yes	SU	Yes	SC	Yes	SO	Yes
2001-05	SC	Yes	SO	Yes	SU	Yes	SU	Yes	no	Yes	SU	Yes	SO	Yes

na = data unavailable;   no = failed to meet threshold for club membership;   SC = status consistent major power;

Table 2. Frequency of Conflict in Major Power (Nondirected) Relevant Dyads by Various Classifications of Status, 1950-2001*

	COW	VCR	Status Consistent	Status Inconsistent	Inconsistent Overachiever	Inconsistent Underachiever
Disputes	481 (31.75%)	371 (24.48%)	176 (11.61%)	210 (13.86%)	83 (5.48%)	127 (8.38%)
Wars	159 (38.68%)	59 (14.35%)	36 (8.75%)	29 (7.05%)	3 (0.73%)	26 (6.32%)
Joining	571 (50.80%)	464 (41.28%)	327 (29.09%)	179 (15.92%)	41 (3.64%)	138 (12.27%)
Interventions	250 (35.48%)	194 (26.76%)	118 (16.27%)	95 (13.10%)	28 (3.86%)	67 (9.24%)

Table 3. MID Onset in Politically Relevant Dyads Based on Various Classifications of Status, 1950-2001: Logit Estimates

	COW	VCR	Status Consistent	Status Inconsistent	Inconsistent Overachiever	Inconsistent Underachiever
Cap. Ratio	2.329 (.26)***	1.992 (.26)***	1.154 (.27)***	1.927 (.27)***	1.259 (.29)***	1.643 (.27)***
Alliance	-.204 (.19)	-.367 (.18)*	-.687 (.17)***	-.300 (.20)	-.377 (.20)	-.427 (.19)*
Democracy	-1.185 (.20)***	-1.170 (.21)***	-1.233 (.22)***	-1.109 (.22)***	-.982 (.23)***	-1.013 (.23)***
Intercept	-3.920 (.10)***	-3.593 (.11)***	-2.849 (.12)***	-3.671 (.12)***	-3.196 (.14)***	-3.397 (.12)***
N	38633	28938	17544	25495	15857	20540
Log Likelihood	-4475.07	-4040.38	-3411.49	-3556.13	-2871.01	-3364.11

Table 4. War Onset in Politically Relevant Dyads Based on Various Classifications of Status, 1950-2001: Logit Estimates

	COW	VCR	Status Consistent	Status Inconsistent	Inconsistent Overachiever	Inconsistent Underachiever
Cap. Ratio	2.045 (.51)***	2.314 (.55)***	1.467 (.63)*	2.315 (.64)***	1.752 (.79)*	2.007 (.66)**
Alliance	-1.448 (.38)***	-1.402 (.41)***	-1.585 (.40)***	-1.140 (.44)**	-1.171 (.47)**	-1.232 (.43)**
Democracy	-2.652 (.75)***	-2.260 (.75)**	-2.182 (.75)**	-2.039 (.75)**	-1.800 (.76)*	-1.876 (.75)*
Intercept	-5.157 (.20)***	-5.371 (.25)***	-4.716 (.31)***	-5.574 (.28)***	-5.207 (.38)***	-5.303 (.28)***
N	38633	28938	17544	25495	15857	20540
Log Likelihood	-1323.81	-898.43	-744.52	-743.94	-581.08	-713.57

Table 5. Joining Ongoing Disputes in Politically Relevant Dyads Based on Various Classifications of Status, 1950-2001: Logit Estimates

	COW	VCR	Status Consistent	Status Inconsistent	Inconsistent Overachiever	Inconsistent Underachiever
Cap. Ratio	1.001 (.43)*	.682 (.47)	.246 (.50)	1..092 (.28)***	1.121 (.33)***	.887 (.30)**
Alliance	.226 (.22)	.145 (23)	-.115 (.23)	-.112 (.21)	-.284 (.25)	-.144 (.21)
Democracy	.219 (.19)	.220 (.21)	.344 (.22)	-.605 (.25)*	-1.241 (.38)***	-.508 (.25)*
Intercept	-4.414 (.08)***	-4.207 (.09)***	-3.825 (.12)***	-4.589 (.11)***	-4.697 (.16)***	-4.461 (.13)***
N	38633	28938	17544	25495	15857	20540
Log Likelihood	-3108.06	-2623.52	-1951.62	-1594.73	-888.82	1400.69

Table 6. Foreign Intervention and Politically Relevant Dyads Based on Various Classifications of Status, 1950-2001: Logit Estimates

	COW	VCR	Status Consistent	Status Inconsistent	Inconsistent Overachiever	Inconsistent Underachiever
Cap. Ratio	1.286 (.28)***	1.054 (.28)***	.565 (.27)*	1.215 (.30)***	.822 (.32)**	1.046 (.29)***
Alliance	.615 (.17)***	.413 (.17)**	.040 (.17)	.408 (.19)*	.182 (.20)	.297 (.19)
Democracy	-1.303 (.21)***	-1.270 (.22)***	-1.271 (.23)***	-1.636 (.32)***	-1.661 (.37)***	-1.466 (.32)***
Intercept	-4.788 (.09)***	-4.503 (.10)***	-3.930 (.12)***	-4.588 (.11)***	-4.168 (.14)***	-4.393 (.12)***
N	38633	28938	17544	25495	15857	20540
Log Likelihood	-2225.51	-1995.52	-1629.55	-1715.92	-1375.25	-1599.80

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Predicted Probabilities of War by Different Classifications of Political Relevance

Figure 3.

Predicted Probabilities of MID Joining by Different Classifications of Political Relevance

Figure 4.

Predicted Probabilities of Foreign Intervention by Different Classifications of Political Relevance