

RESEARCH ARTICLE

China's Conflict Behaviour

Domestic and International Drivers

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Abstract

The article analyses China's conflict behaviour from 1949 to 2014. The study aims to further our understanding of the country's participation in international conflicts and disputes by presenting the first attempt in the scholarship at a systematic quantitative analysis of China's conflict behaviour. A large-N analysis is carried out through a series of logistic regression models to measure the impact of international and domestic factors. The results of the analysis show that China's conflict behaviour is strongly affected by international factors such as the power gap between China and target states and the presence of territorial claims; at the same time, domestic conditions—intraparty struggle and regime vulnerability—can mitigate the inclination towards the use of force.

Keywords: International Relations; Conflict Behaviour; Militarized Interstate Dispute; China

Introduction

Although previous studies have offered partial explanations for China's conflict behaviour in the international arena, scholars have favoured specific timeframes or geographical case studies, primarily analysed via qualitative methodologies. This research proposes to advance these studies by examining the country's decisions to engage with international conflicts and disputes throughout its history. In so doing, we strive to offer a quantitative grounding to the numerous case studies developed on China's conflict behaviour over the years. In particular, the article presents the first attempt in the scholarship at a systematic quantitative analysis of China's conflict behaviour between 1949 and 2014 by combining the systemic, state, and unit levels of analysis under an integrated research framework. The research provides a solid empirical basis to discuss qualitative studies and a replicable research method that future studies on China's military posture can adopt.

The first section presents an overview of explanations of Chinese international behaviour. The second section specifies the research design: theoretical model, operational hypotheses, and data. The third section analyses empirical evidence, and the conclusion reviews the main points of strength and weakness of the study.

Alternative Explanations for China's Conflict Behaviour

According to Alastair I. Johnston (1998), China stands out as one of the countries most inclined to use force and get involved in military disputes. Such propensity to conflict has been primarily investigated through approaches drawn from International Relations theory

(IR), considering different analytical levels, i.e., systemic, state, and individual (Breslin, 2009; Chiang Liao, 2016, 2018).¹

Systemic-level explanations primarily attribute China's assertiveness to offensive and defensive realism. On the one hand, offensive realists argue that the 2008 global financial crisis has affected the balance of power, weakened U.S. clout and bolstered China's. Hence, conflict behaviour is explained in connection to China's superior relative capabilities and the realisation that the U.S. is unable to limit the country's global endeavours (He & Feng, 2012; Goldstein, 2015). On the other hand, defensive realists contend that China's assertiveness stems from its responses to mounting threats to territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Fravel, 2011; Pham, 2011; Friedberg, 2015; Morton, 2016).

However, structural realists have struggled to explain China's behaviour, especially after the global financial crisis, which marked a perceived decline in American power (Chiang Liao, 2018). Structural approaches predicted that China would continue to follow Deng Xiaoping's "passive" doctrine (*taoguang yanghui*), as global trends favoured the rising country (at the U.S. expense). Nevertheless, the country's behaviour has defied such expectations.

In contrast with systemic-level explanations, state-level perspectives emphasize domestic factors as the primary drivers of China's conflict behaviour. Scholars have explored this through three approaches. First, China's assertiveness has been connected to institutional groups, such as military cadres or local government officials, suggesting that changes within these groups influence China's conflict behaviour (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003; Glaser & Medeiros, 2007; Frazier, 2011; Shambaugh, 2011; Lai & Kang, 2014). Second, some attribute belligerence to political élites seeking to bolster their legitimacy during leadership transitions (Goldstein, 2012). Third, rising nationalism is identified as a driver of China's assertiveness (Hughes, 2011; Johnston, 2013; Zhao, 2013; Zhang, 2014). After the 2008 Beijing Olympics, in particular, Chinese leaders showed the need to redirect nationalist sentiments and maintain high levels of legitimacy, thus placing regime survival considerations at the centre of the country's policymaking (Ross, 2013; Chiang Liao, 2018).²

However, state-level explanations are dually flawed. First, if domestic pressure truly drove China's conflict behaviour, considering the longstanding continuity of its Communist political system, we would expect to see consistent levels of assertiveness throughout its history (Chiang Liao, 2016). Second, China could be expected to respond to threats to regime survival by attempting to stabilise the international system, thus searching for cooperation instead of conflict, especially in neighbouring areas (Fravel, 2008).

A third perspective consider individual-level factors, drawing from social constructivism to understand how ideas and culture influence foreign policy (Johnston 1995, 1996, 2008). Scholars argue that changes in how political élites interpret systemic pressure explain China's conflict behaviour. These may stem from changes in the beliefs of the predominant élites or leaders (Barnett, 1985; Scobell & Harold, 2003; Lampton, 2014). In the first case, China's assertiveness is attributed to elite triumphalism, as seen in the rhetoric of "national rejuvenation" (Shi, 2013; Friedberg, 2014; Chiang Liao, 2016). In the second case, China's conflict behaviour is linked to leaders' beliefs about the international situation (He, 2013; Lampton, 2014; Brown, 2018). Individual-level explanations overlook the influence of international and domestic contexts on leaders' belief systems.

¹ Seminal works investigating China's propensity to conflict include Johnston (1998, 2013), Mearsheimer (2006, 2014), Yue (2008), Fravel (2008, 2010), Buzan (2010), Johnston (2013), and Friedberg (2014).

² The 2008 Olympic Games has been interpreted as a watershed moment for China's nationalism, as the event was understood as a signal of China's imminent rise to great power status vis-à-vis the American decline. On this point, see Economy and Seagal (2008) and Ross (2013).

The above literature review indicates that an in-depth analysis of China’s conflict behaviour needs to factor in systemic *and* unit-level variables. In this article, we tested a set of hypotheses that focus on changes in the balance of power as well as the impact of domestic and individual variables.

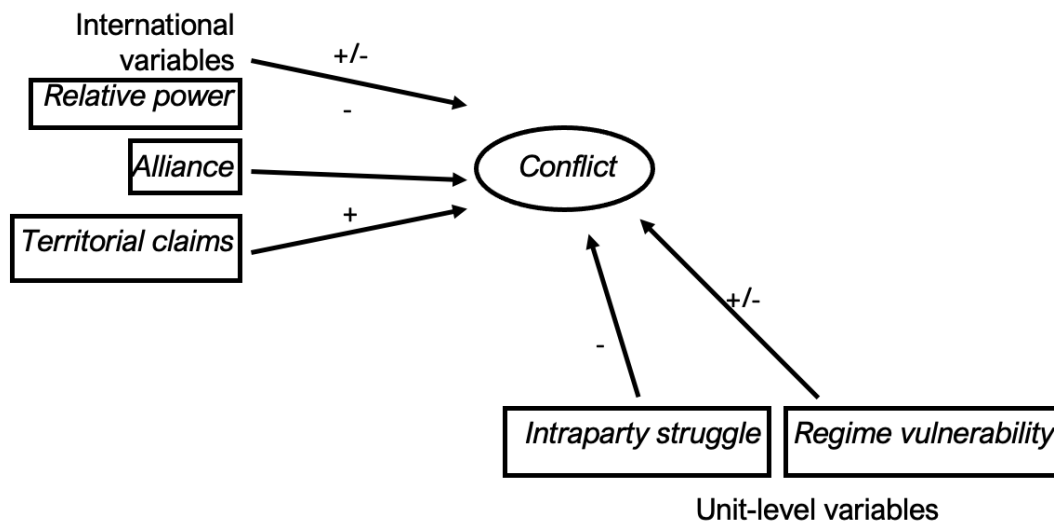
Research Design and Data

To explain China’s conflict behaviour, we assert the existence of a relation between conflictual behaviour and balance of power, alliance, and territorial claims at the international level, and between external conflict and party cohesion and regime vulnerability at the domestic level. Causal relations are depicted in Figure 1. The direction and the positive or negative signs of the causal arrows are explained below.

We engage with the IR literature on the relevance of the linkages between foreign policy and domestic politics to develop our analytical framework (e.g., Putnam, 1988; Ikenberry, 1996), relying on the assumption that domestic political factors *as well as* systemic considerations do shape states’ decisions on war and peace (Bueno de Mesquita, 2002). Moreover, we also draw from the quantitative literature on conflicts which stresses the role played by power and territorial claims in explaining the probability of state involvement in a conflict (Mclaughlin Mitchell & Vasquez, 2014; 2021).

The literature on Chinese politics places a great emphasis on internal dynamics (Christensen, 1996; Ross, 2009: part III). As M. Taylor Fravel (2019) states in his study on the formation of Chinese military doctrine, Beijing reacts to external stimuli, but the way in which it reacts is strongly affected by unit-level factors. Unit-level factors include mainly intraparty struggle (factionalism) and the stability/instability of the regime.

Figure 1. China’s conflict behaviour.



The dependent variable—conflict behaviour—is operationalised by calculating the probability of China’s involvement in a militarised interstate dispute (MID) (Jones et al., 1996). From 1949–2014, China was entangled in 363 MIDs over a total number of 9,872 cases of dyad per year.³

³ We have used the COW’s Dyadic MID Database v4.01 (Maoz et al., 2018). The number 9,872 is obtained considering all potential dyads in which China was involved in the period 1950–2014. Given that part of 1949 was still characterised by civil war and the new state was established in October 1950, we started calculating from January 1, 1950.

We have operationalised independent international variables in three ways: change of national relative power, the building of an anti-Chinese alliance network, and the presence of a territorial claim.

Regarding relative power, the literature suggests two opposite hypotheses. Classic balance of power theories (Dehio, 1963; Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979) contend that appetite grows with resources; accordingly, a state with rising power will be more assertive, and the probability of involvement in a conflict will be higher. Other theories of International Relations, more specifically, the bargaining theory of war (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2002), suggest a very different conclusion. A conflict takes at least two actors, both determined to resort to arms. War is the outcome of a bargaining breakdown that occurs when states cannot agree on dividing a limited resource. This is more likely when it is unclear who has more power. In a situation such as this, states can decide to resort to war to verify their relative bargaining power and how to divide the pie on the battlefield. Thus, the risk of a bargaining breakdown (or the risk of war) is higher when the power gap is not very large, and both states can expect to be better off fighting than not fighting. Where the “balance of power” theory expects that a large power gap (*PG*) will increase the probability of conflict, the “bargaining theory of war” expects that a small capability gap will increase the likelihood of a conflict.

We calculated the power of China yearly, using the CINC dataset (Singer et al., 1972), and then divided it by the power of the target state. We considered a large power gap as a ratio between state A and state B greater than 4 and coded the value of the dyad/year as 0 and a small power gap as a ratio less than 4 and coded it as 1. The threshold of 4 is slightly arbitrary, but it is a compromise between the codification of Stuart Bremer (1992), who suggests a large power gap as a ratio greater than ten, and other studies on national power, which indicate a ratio greater than 3:1 as a critical threshold (Mearsheimer, 1988; 1989). Our first hypothesis generates two different theoretical expectations:

H1a. Under the condition of a large power gap (number of dyads in which the ratio between China’s power and target state’s power—PG—is more than 4), China’s probability of MID involvement increases (balance of power theory).

H1b. Under the condition of a small power gap (number of dyads in which the ratio between China’s power and the target state’s power—PG—is less than 4), China’s probability of MID involvement increases (bargaining theory of war).

Relative power can be increased by piling up political/military resources or building an alliance with another state. Following the logic of external balancing, the hypothesis is that China should be deterred from using its military power when the target state has a defence pact with another great power (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1990; Leeds, 2003). Considering all the potential dyads, we coded a dyad/year as 0 when China interacts with a state that does not have a defence pact with the U.S. and coded as 1 a dyad/year when a state has an alliance pact with the U.S.⁴ Thus, our second hypothesis is as follows:

H2. When the target state has a defence pact (All) with the U.S. (number of dyads in which the All value is 1), China’s probability of MID involvement decreases.

⁴ For alliance we have used the COW dataset v4.1 (Gibler, 2009). We have considered the alliance of target state with the U.S. because of its paramount role played at the international and regional level.

The third international variable is Chinese territorial claim towards a target state. Territorial issues are a crucial variable in explaining severe interstate conflict. Scholarship on quantitative analysis of conflicts consistently indicates the territorial issue as one of the best predictors of the breakout of a dispute between two states (Diehl, 1991; Bremer, 1992; Tir & Vasquez, 2012; Hensel et al., 2008; Hensel & Goemans, 2021). This is because the territorial issue can have both a tangible value (economic, military, strategic) and an intangible value (historical, symbolic, identity) (Hensel et al., 2008). This point is widely confirmed by the literature on Chinese foreign policy that stresses the paramount role played by territorial integrity in Beijing's international behaviour (Swaine & Tellis, 2000; Scobell, 2003; Fravel, 2008; Medeiros, 2009). We have identified China's territorial claims since late 1949 using secondary literature. China has been involved in territorial issues with several countries. Some of these disputes are still underway: Bhutan, India, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the South China Sea. Others have been settled: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Mongolia, Myanmar, North Korea, Pakistan, and Russia. We coded a dyad/year without a territorial claim as 0 and a dyad/year characterised by the presence of a territorial claim as 1. Our third hypothesis is as follows:

H3. When China has a territorial claim (TC) with the target state (number of dyads in which TC value is 1), China's probability of MID involvement increases.

At the unit level, we considered two main variables: the degree of leadership cohesion and the risk of regime collapse. One of the most important features of Chinese society, affecting all policy decisions in a pervasive way, is factionalism (Nathan, 1973; Pye, 1981; Unger, 2002; Huang, 2008). Although the studies on factionalism mainly dealt with domestic political issues (Bo, 2007), the widespread feeling among researchers was that the dynamics between factions had some effect on foreign policy as well, as in the case of the struggle between Maoists and pro-Soviets (Yu, 1994, 242).⁵

To assess the weight of unit-level variables, we considered the intensity of factionalism, measured by the extent of intraparty struggle, and the level of threat to the regime derived from social instability.

Party unity is considered a central factor in explaining the capacity of Chinese leadership to act assertively in the military field (Fravel, 2019, p. 21). In a situation characterised by a low level of party unity, we can expect a less assertive foreign policy and a lower probability of China's involvement in external conflicts. To measure the level of party unity, we considered as evidence of a leadership division three factors: the presence of a reshuffle of the Politburo before the end of the mandate; expulsions, removals, and purges of élite Party members; and attempts at power transitions outside traditional norms.⁶ These criteria have produced a division of periods of unity/disunity largely overlapping with that proposed by Fravel, so we are quite confident in its reliability. We coded a dyad/year with a high intraparty struggle as 1 and a dyad/year with a low intraparty struggle as 0. The fourth hypothesis is as follows:

⁵ In the literature, an ongoing debate persists regarding which factions—defined here as patron-client clusters of interconnected officials following Nathan (1973)—constitute relevant political units in China (e.g., Shih et al., 2012; Fisman et al., 2020; Cheung, 2022, 2023; Fracois et al., 2023). Despite the proliferation of factions in media accounts, scholars face challenges in measuring them due to the opaque nature of China's political system. However, this research does not aim to provide a systematic study on factions—detailing their organization, changes in membership, and power dynamics—but rather focuses on examining the broader dynamics of factionalism and their impact on China's foreign policy decisions, recognizing the influence of political elite fragmentation on the formulation of foreign and security policy.

⁶ On this criteria, see Teiwes (1984, 1993).

H4. Under the condition of high intraparty struggle (IPS) (number of dyads in which the IPS value is 1), China's probability of MID involvement decreases.

If there is a scholarly consensus about party unity and international assertiveness, interpreting the causal relationship between social instability and China's conflict behaviour is more complex. This ambiguity mirrors the lack of consent in the IR literature on the diversionary explanation of external conflict (DeRouen, 1995; Fordham, 1998; Levy, 2001; Mclaughlin Mitchell & Prins, 2004). That the concern for social stability/instability is paramount for Chinese policymakers is a matter of fact (Feuerwerker, 1972). However, identifying the direction of the causal arrow is slightly more complicated. We can single out two opposing positions, well represented by Allen Whiting on the one end and Taylor Fravel on the other. Allen Whiting sees a dangerous correlation between domestic instability and China's external behaviour, summarised by the expression "enemy without and trouble within" (Whiting, 1975, p. 28).⁷ Thomas Christensen (1996) finds that external conflict was strongly correlated with domestic instability at the time of the Great Leap Forward, when aggressive international behaviour was used to mobilise popular support for the regime's policies. More recently, Lyle Goldstein (2001) proposed an explanation for the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clashes based on diversionary theory. The conflict resulted from Mao's tentative of using an external enemy to prompt a "rally round the flag" effect and alleviate the centrifugal pressures generated by the Cultural Revolution (Goldstein, 2001).

Fravel states a very different connection between domestic instability and external conflict, epitomized by the expression "conflict within and cooperation without" (Fravel, 2005; 2008). According to Fravel, "regime insecurity best explains China's many attempts to compromise in its territorial disputes" (Fravel, 2005, p. 5). A leaning towards compromise in a situation of domestic turmoil would result from three factors: 1) the need to gain external support for an opposing domestic threat, 2) the need to concentrate political resources on internal repression and not on international security, and 3) the effort to boost the regime's international legitimacy.

We used the inflation rate as a proxy to assess the role played by regime vulnerability (RV).⁸ A high level of regime vulnerability presents a dyad/year with an RV index one standard deviation above the mean (coded as 1). Given the lack of consensus on the causal relation between domestic instability and external behaviour, our last hypothesis is split into two opposite theoretical expectations:

H5a. In a situation of high regime vulnerability (number of dyads with China showing an RV score one standard deviation above the mean), China's military behaviour will be more assertive, with an increased probability of MID involvement ("enemy without and trouble within").

H5b. In a situation of high regime vulnerability (number of dyads with China showing an RV score one standard deviation above the mean), China's military behaviour will be less

⁷ "The combination of a perceived enemy on the border and serious internal crisis increases the likelihood of a 'worst case' analysis in Peking" (Whiting, 1975, p. 232).

⁸ On the use of different proxy for measuring regime vulnerability (inflation rate, unemployment rate, misery index), see De Rouen (1995); Fordham (1998); and Mclaughlin Mitchell and Prins (2004). Data on Chinese inflation rate have been obtained by World Bank for the period post-1987. For the period 1953-1986 data are from Franses (2020), Burdekin and Wang (1999), and Chow and Wang (2010). The lacking data for 1950, 1951 and 1952 have been calculated, by interpolation, as the average value of the successive three years.

assertive, with a smaller probability of MID involvement (“conflict within and cooperation without”).

For factoring in individual variables, in particular the unique role of Mao, and the transformation of the international system, we also inserted several control variables that identify critical periods of China’s international history: Maoism, 1949-1979 (coded as 1);⁹ the Cold War, 1949-1989 (coded as 1); the Sino-Soviet split, 1957-1988 (coded as 1); and the rise of the “China threat” issue, 1995-2014 (coded as 1).¹⁰

Empirical Analysis

We assume that independent variables interact both with the dependent variable and among them. We thus performed a multilevel logistic regression to measure every variable’s impact when operating simultaneously (Model 1 in Table 1).¹¹ To assess whether the associations identified remain constant when different time spans are considered—or are time-bound—we introduced four control variables: the distinction between the Maoist and post-Maoist periods (Model 2) (which permits us to analyse the role played by individual factors), the end of the Cold War (Model 3), the Sino-Soviet split (Model 4), and the ascent of China to a world power status (Model 5).

All factors considered in 1949-2014 (Model 1) operate in the expected direction and are statistically significant (except alliance). We supposed that Beijing’s involvement in an MID could be strongly linked to its relative power. However, as specified in the research design, analyses of the impact of national power produce different expectations. The “balance of power theory” states that an increasing power gap (*PG*) will produce instability and an incentive to behave more aggressively; conversely, the “bargaining theory of war” expects that a small power gap will increase the probability of miscalculation in a crisis and, accordingly, the probability of a bargaining breakdown and a conflict outbreak. Empirical evidence strongly supports a view of China’s conflict behaviour as more consistent with the “bargaining theory of war” (Hypothesis H1b). A small *PG* between China and the target states increases the probability of Beijing involvement in an MID significantly ($p < .001$): the smaller the power disparity between China and the target state is, the greater the probability that a dispute escalates to the military level. This logic is particularly evident when examining China’s participation in military disputes against East Asian competitors and, above all, in the case of China’s confrontations against India. Miscalculations have stirred mutual misinterpretation of behaviour, with India fearful about Chinese aggressiveness and border reconfiguration, and China worried about India’s underestimation of its rank/power. Indeed, at times of crisis, Beijing and New Delhi have been prone to take up arms.

⁹ Maoism is referred to in this article as a period in Chinese history characterized by the influence of Mao Zedong’s assumptions and worldviews on the country’s political system (Lovell, 2019). When discussing Maoism as a variable, we engage with literature that examines the impact of predominant leaders, such as Mao Zedong, on Chinese foreign and security policy (Herrman et al., 2001). We contend that despite developments in China’s political system and leadership competition within the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution, the core principles of Maoism continued to shape the country’s foreign policy and conflict behaviour. Even reformers aimed to align with Mao’s original ideological framework, understood as the “correct line” of thinking (Samarani, 2017).

¹⁰ We have chosen the year 1995, because in scholarly literature this is considered as the moment in which the China threat issue appeared (Roy, 1996), and because it is the year in which China’s power, measured using the COW’s CINC index, surpassed America’s power. For a contrary view on the power balance between the U.S. and PRC, see Beckley (2018).

¹¹ Multilevel regressions sidestep the problem of non-independence of the observations within the clusters.

Table 1. Logit model: China's involvement in militarised disputes, 1949-2014.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Power gap</i>	2.116*** (.611)	1.286* (.662)	1.781** (.636)	2.191*** (.608)	1.892** (.628)
<i>Alliance</i>	-.060 (.346)	-.631* (.372)	-.291 (.353)	.062 (.351)	-.195 (.350)
<i>Territorial claims</i>	1.769*** (.410)	1.689*** (.406)	1.641*** (.412)	1.813*** (.409)	1.667*** (.412)
<i>Intraparty struggle</i>	-.569*** (.142)	-.731*** (.149)	-.658*** (.145)	-.508** (.146)	-.626*** (.144)
<i>Regime vulnerability</i>	-.513* (.247)	-.144 (.260)	-.493* (.249)	-.520* (.247)	-.624* (.251)
<i>Maoism</i>		1.434*** (.163)			
<i>Cold War</i>			.726*** (.162)		
<i>Sino-Soviet Split</i>				-.268* (.150)	
<i>China Rise</i>					-.504** (.171)
Constant	-7.118*** (.625)	-7.524*** (.656)	-7.387*** (.634)	-7.067*** (.621)	-6.832*** (.636)
Observations	9,782	9,782	9,782	9,782	9,782
Log likelihood	-802.717	-760.738	-792.205	-801.101	-798.169

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed test), standard error in parentheses.

*p < .10

The alliance variable (*All*) presents a negative sign, as expected (i.e., a deterrent effect on Beijing's initiative), but it is statistically insignificant. Empirical data show that policymakers in Beijing seemed quite indifferent, for the whole period of 1949-2014, to the risk that a military intervention against a country allied with the U.S. could trigger a confrontation with Washington. This is slightly puzzling. We expected that, for different reasons, a country's defence pact with the U.S. could influence China's strategic calculus. Before rapprochement, the U.S. was the main enemy and the primary external actor posing an existential threat to China, thus avoiding an escalation with a U.S. ally was a paramount goal. At the time of the Sino-Soviet split, to avoid an attack on a U.S. ally could signal goodwill and an alignment with Washington's policy. To better validate these presumptions, we look at other periodisations below.

As expected, territorial claims predict well China's conflict behaviour (Hypothesis H3). It works in the right direction (when a territorial issue is at stake, Beijing's confrontational approach is more likely) and has a high statistical significance ($p < .001$). The presence of a territorial claim ($TC = 1$) increases the probability of China's decision to escalate the level of conflict or resort to arms in a dramatic way. This empirical evidence is consistent with the alleged "obsession" of Chinese policymakers towards territorial integrity stressed by

scholarly literature. As Andrew Scobell (2003) notes, the defence of sovereignty from external interference, territorial integrity, and national unification are all cases in which the use of force is amply justified. On these issues, the Chinese leadership feels authorised to use military force. This explains the heightened sensitivity and propensity to use force in situations such as the border conflict with India, the Tibetan issue, or a prospective threat of independence from Taiwan. This result partially contradicts what Fravel says, i.e., that China has been less warlike than other states regarding territorial issues. “China has been more likely to compromise over disputed territory and less likely to use force than many policy analysts assert, international relations theories might predict, or China scholars expect” (Fravel, 2008: 3). In fact, our data demonstrates that when territorial issues are at stake, China’s foreign behaviour is no less prone to military escalation than that of other governments.

A cursory look at China’s MIDs shows that 77 out of 363 militarised disputes are of territorial type (21%). Considering only MIDs for which a precise classification is offered (as a territorial, policy, or regime change issues), this figure shifts to 77 out of 153 (50.3%).¹² Considering that the number of territorial claims per year is 686, these data mean that 11.2% of Chinese territorial claims escalate to a militarised dispute. The distinction between territorial claims and territorial disputes may explain the discrepancy between our findings and Fravel’s. Our empirical evidence says that China is prone to conflict behaviour for territorial issues; however, the fact that only a fraction of territorial claims escalates to military confrontation is also consistent with Fravel’s model. This gap between potential and actual territorial disputes may either be due to the low salience of some issues (Hensel et al., 2008) and/or the result of the constraining effect played by domestic variables on external intervention, such as the lack of cohesion inside the Communist Party and regime insecurity. Now, we analyse the effects of these two variables.

The literature is consensual in maintaining that the level of elite cohesion is crucial to explain the international behaviour of a nation (Schweller, 2004, p. 181). The empirical evidence about China’s conflict behaviour is consistent with our hypothesis (H4). The association between intraparty struggle and MID involvement is negative and statistically significant ($p < .001$). A high intraparty struggle (IPS) moderates Beijing’s propensity to intervene in a militarised dispute. In other words, when the Chinese communist elite is afflicted by harsh intraparty struggle, it will be less inclined to display assertive behaviour, and the probability of MID involvement decreases. A regime weakened and fragmented by intraparty struggle is characterised by a pressing need for stability. On the one hand, engaging in military disputes in this phase would make the CCP risk of aggravating imbalances among institutional groups—especially favouring the military clique—and worsening internal disparities. On the other hand, the intraparty struggle would make consensus impossible, and conflicts would thus widen internal divides and further destabilise the party. This factor can mitigate the pressures generated by the balance of power considerations and the presence of territorial claims.

In the same direction works the last domestic variable considered: regime vulnerability (RV). This factor has generated two contrasting hypotheses (H5a and H5b): the first states a positive association between a high RV and MID involvement; the second, a negative association. Empirical data seem more in line with the thesis proposed by Fravel: domestic turmoil reduces the pressure to be involved in an external conflict and not the opposite. The statistical association is robust ($p < .05$), and the negative sign is compelling evidence that Chinese leaders are little inclined to use force in a diversionary way.

¹² In the COW dataset there are many non-classified disputes (210). These figures are consistent with Johnston (1998).

In summary, the empirical data are consistent with all our hypotheses except Hypothesis H2 (the deterrent role of alliance). International factors, such as the change in the balance of power and the presence of a territorial claim, are the best predictors of China's involvement in an MID. However, unit-level variables, such as intraparty struggle and regime vulnerability, can constrain Chinese policy-makers inclination to react assertively (i.e., remaining involved in a military clash).

When control variables are considered, these findings do not differ significantly (Models 2, 3, 4, and 5). The consistency of data across different time spans provides evidence of the robustness of our results. Both considering the change produced by the end of the Cold War (Model 3) and the change in the relationship with the Soviet Union/Russia, characterised by periods of amity and enmity (Model 4), the role played by our variables remains substantially the same. China's conflict behaviour does not seem to be affected by the end of bipolarism and by the troubled alliance with Moscow. All variables work in the expected direction and are statistically significant. The only exception is, again, the role of alliance. Even the control variable "China Rise" (Model 5) causes no particular changes in the weight and direction of independent variables.¹³

More interesting are the results produced by the individual control variable: the role of Mao (Model 2). In this case, two variables change significantly: alliance and regime vulnerability. By considering the periodisation between Maoism and post-Maoism, the role of alliance works in the expected direction (deterrent role) and becomes statistically significant ($p < .10$). Notwithstanding Mao's well-known disdain for America's power, considered a paper tiger (Schram, 1969; Shambaugh, 1991), his attitude regarding a country allied to Washington seems to be inclined towards prudence. In Maoist China, the presence of a defence pact of a target state with the U.S. reduces the likelihood of MID involvement in a substantial way. When dealing with countries under the umbrella of American extended deterrence, Mao appears to be less reckless than previously assumed.¹⁴

The result relating to the regime's vulnerability is also very interesting: at the time of Mao, RV has less importance in the Beijing conflict decision. Social instability appears irrelevant when Mao's control variable is factored in. Probably, Mao's paramount and undisputed role enabled him to ignore bottom-up pressures. Mao manipulated social pressures more than the other way around. This logic, in particular, explains China's participation in conflicts at times of severe social instability, such as the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution.¹⁵ Mao's confidence in his worldview and understanding of how China should be administered remained key determinants of his impenetrability to the potential effects of social instability.¹⁶

Therefore, even controlling for different time spans, the findings of our model remain very robust and consistent. The only time-bound effect, as could be expected, is partially determined by Mao's idiosyncratic role in the Chinese political system.

¹³ By analysing the odds ratio, the only thing that can be inferred is a slightly more important role played by power consideration in the post-1995 period compared to the previous period. A fact that possibly could be interpreted as a sign of a more confident/assertive China.

¹⁴ The significance of this result is confirmed by bivariate analysis: the association between MID involvement and alliance in the Maoist period presents a p value $< .01$.

¹⁵ On this point, see Christensen (1996) and Goldstein (2001). As Fewsmith and Rosen note (2001), the capacity of social pressures to affect Chinese foreign policymaking is greater when there is a fragmented leadership.

¹⁶ As a striking example, take China's support of the 1960 Congo crisis in the middle of the disastrous effects of the Great Leap Forward.

To present logistic regression findings as substantive results, Table 2 reports the predicted probabilities of China’s MID involvement based on the full Model 1.¹⁷ International variables—power gap and territorial claims—are associated with a significant increase in the probability of China’s MID involvement. They display an overriding role. When the value of the power gap shifts from large to small, the probability of MID involvement increases by 204%, and when there is a territorial claim at stake, the probability of MID involvement increases by 154%. The role of a defence pact of target states with the U.S. is noninfluential. As predicted by neoclassical realism,¹⁸ domestic conditions modify the effect of pressures deriving from international stimuli. In particular, an increase in intraparty struggle reduces the likelihood of China’s MID involvement by 27%. The shift of regime vulnerability from low to high reduces the probability of involvement in a militarised dispute by another 26%.

Table 2. Predicted probability of China’s involvement in MIDs.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Predicted probability</i>	<i>Delta</i>
<i>Power gap</i>		
large (0)	.025	
small (1)	.076	.051
<i>Alliance</i>		
no (0)	.026	
yes (1)	.025	-.001
<i>Territorial claims</i>		
no (0)	.024	
yes (1)	.061	.037
<i>Intraparty struggle</i>		
low (0)	.030	
high (1)	.022	-.008
<i>Regime vulnerability</i>		
low (0)	.027	
high (1)	.020	-.007

Summing up, the probability of China’s MID involvement is highest when: The power gap is small; *plus* The target state has no defence pact with the U.S. (this variable is not statistically significant except for the Maoist period); *plus* There is a territorial claim at stake; *plus* The leadership is cohesive; *plus* There is a low level of regime vulnerability.

Conclusion

We identified five factors that might affect China’s conflict behaviour. These are Beijing’s relative power, a disputant’s alliance with the U.S., territorial claims, the intraparty struggle within the ruling Communist Party, and the country’s regime vulnerability.

Our analysis of the impact of China’s relative power on its conflict behaviour has pointed to an increase in Beijing’s probability of participating in an MID when the power gap is small. In our operationalisation of the power gap variable, we relied on the CINC dataset, which

¹⁷ Predicted probability of each variable, when it assumes the value of 0 or 1, is calculated holding other variables at their mean value.

¹⁸ On neoclassical realism, see Rose (1998), Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro (2009), and Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell (2016).

presents a measure of power focused on combining a country's military, demographic and economic strengths. Although the CINC is useful, as it ensures consistent long-term temporal coverage, the dataset fails to account for short-term power components (such as military preparedness) and thus offers a selective power estimate.

The alliance variable has no statistical significance in our model, except when the analysis exclusively focuses on the Maoist period. Indeed, while Chinese policymakers generally appear not to be deterred by a disputant's alliance with the U.S., this tendency is reversed under Mao. On the one hand, these findings corroborate historical works debating the extent and durability of Mao's revisionist foreign policy (Feng, 2009; Yahuda, 2016). On the other, disregarding the presence of disputants' alliances with the U.S. picks up on China's understanding of a hub-and-spoke international relations model that places Beijing at the centre of the system and other international actors around it. This conformation, therefore, would make a country's alliance with the U.S. irrelevant to Beijing's strategic considerations.

The territorial claim is the most salient variable affecting China's involvement in MIDs. The presence of a territorial claim, in fact, significantly increases the likelihood that the country will take up arms. The goals of territorial integrity and national unity have not only been constituting part of the "Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", which have informed the country's approach to foreign policy since 1954 but have also remained at the forefront of the Communist Party's legitimacy to rule.¹⁹ Nonetheless, we also observed that only a limited number of China's territorial claims escalate into conflict, thus explaining the partial incongruity of our findings on a territorial claim with Fravel's. Consistent with neoclassical realism, we have explained this limited number of escalations because of the effect of domestic variables on systemic stimuli.

At the state level, we noticed that intraparty struggle negatively affects China's MID involvement, supporting the notion that elite cohesion remains central in explaining states' international behaviour. This is even more striking in the case of Beijing, given that the country is a one-party regime overconcerned with maintaining internal stability and ensuring the continuity of Communist rule. Therefore, entering conflict at highly divisive junctures risks precipitating disparities by favouring certain party groups over others.

Last, our findings indicate that regime vulnerability reduces China's participation in MIDs, supporting that Beijing remains wary of employing diversionary tactics. The only exception to this result occurs when the analysis is exclusively focused on the Maoist period: in this case, social pressures are, in fact, irrelevant. We hypothesised that Mao's unique grasp of the country's social and political system allowed him to disregard *bottom-up* pressures in his calculations. It should be noted here that the unavailability of official statistics on China's unemployment and inflation rates, especially for the 1950s, forced the authors to rely on secondary literature and estimates calculated through interpolation to compile the regime vulnerability variable.

A long-term quantitative investigation of China's conflict behaviour represents our main contribution to the literature. In addition to building on Johnston's 1998 study, the quantitative analysis offers a framework to test for the insights drawn by several qualitative-oriented investigations, which have constituted most studies conducted on China's military behaviour. By doing so, we provide a quantitative foundation to complement these case studies. Moreover, by relying on an approach that combines systemic and country-specific variables, the paper moves towards identifying a multidisciplinary perspective that can facilitate the dialogue between IR theory and area studies.

¹⁹ The 2049 celebration marking the centenary establishment of the People's Republic fundamentally revolves around territorial ambitions.

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Funding

The research received no grants from public, commercial or non-profit funding agency.

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