# Issue indivisibility and territorial claims[*]

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## Abstract

Early research on contentious issues in world politics suggested that there is an important distinction between largely tangible and largely intangible issues. Tangible issues are thought to be easier to resolve, while intangible issues can fester for long periods of time through fruitless negotiations and repeated armed conflict. Research on territorial issues has suggested that many territorial claims are driven by both tangible and intangible concerns, though, which complicates the analysis of issue tangibility. The authors argue that territorial issues with greater intangible salience (e.g. historical possessions, important homelands, sacred sites, identity ties) should be harder to resolve peacefully and should produce more frequent and severe militarized conflict. Empirical analyses of 191 territorial claims in the Americas and Western Europe (1816–2001) provide mixed support for these expectations. Territorial claims with high intangible salience are significantly more likely to experience militarized disputes and wars. Surprisingly, though, states are much more likely to strike peaceful agreements with their adversaries over territories that are valued for intangible reasons.

## Introduction

Militarized conflicts over territory have been an enduring feature of modern world politics. Research has demonstrated that territorial issues escalate to war and produce protracted conflicts and enduring rivalries more frequently than other issues. Yet many territorial contests are resolved peacefully. Why are states able to strike peaceful bargains to settle some territorial claims but not others? One explanation focuses on the tangible and intangible salience that states attach to contentious issues. Issues are often difficult to resolve peacefully if the stakes are viewed as indivisible, which is more likely when territory is valued for intangible reasons, such as the presence of sacred sites (Jerusalem), one's ethnic kinsmen (Alsace-Lorraine), or the scene of pivotal historical events (Kosovo). While some studies find evidence linking issue salience and militarized conflict, measurement of issue intangibility has been difficult, and relatively little research has examined peaceful issue management.

We use improved measures of the tangible and intangible salience of territory to evaluate two propositions. We argue that territorial issues with greater intangible salience are both harder to resolve peacefully and more likely to result in severe militarized conflict. Empirical analyses of territorial claims in the Americas and Western Europe provide mixed support for these expectations. Territorial claims with high intangible value are more likely to experience severe militarized disputes and wars, but also more likely to produce agreements through peaceful negotiations. We discuss how these results fit with existing research, and offer suggestions for future work.

### Tangible and intangible issues

International relations scholars often characterize international interactions as competition over contentious issues (Rosenau, 1971; Mansbach and Vasquez, 1981; Diehl, 1992; Vasquez, 1993; Hensel, 2001).[1] Issues can involve competing views on *tangible* objectives, such as control over a particular territory, the protection of an ethnic minority, or the removal of a particular leader, as well as competing views on *intangible* objectives such as influence, prestige, or ideology (Keohane and Nye, 1977; Randle, 1987; Holsti, 1991; Diehl, 1992).[2] Numerous empirical studies demonstrate that more tangible issues involve fewer actors, more costly

resources, less frequent and persistent contention, and more cooperative interactions (Rosenau, 1971; Mansbach and Vasquez, 1981; Vasquez, 1983; Bercovitch and Langley, 1993).

The notion that intangible issues are more difficult to settle also appears in the bargaining literature (e.g. Schelling, 1960; Pruitt, 1971; Rubin and Brown, 1975; Fearon, 1995; Brams and Taylor, 1996).[3] Rubin and Brown (1975, pp. 127–128) provide a compelling example of bargaining on a used car lot between a salesman whose boss is observing the sale and a husband whose wife is observing his behavior. The customer makes an offer on a car, which the salesman rejects, fearing that his boss will perceive the offer as being too low. The customer then rejects a counter-offer for a few hundred dollars more, as he does not want his wife to conclude that he is a weak bargainer. While the interaction concerned a tangible dollar amount, intangible concerns for reputation and face-saving prevented an agreement.

Bargaining is central to Fearon's (1995) rationalist account of war. If war is costly, then why would rational leaders choose war, rather than reaching the same outcome through negotiations? Fearon provides three explanations: private information (and incentives to misrepresent it), commitment problems, and issue indivisibilities. Issue indivisibilities make it difficult for states to locate a peaceful settlement that both would accept, because both sides have an incentive to maintain a reputation for toughness. Pruitt (1971, 207ff) refers to these intangible elements in bargaining as *image losses* and argues that an equitable exchange of concessions helps resolve the bargaining dilemma by reducing both sides' image losses, implying that intangible issues could be settled if both sides were willing to make concessions toward an equitable and fair agreement.

Focusing on indivisibility and armed conflict, Hassner (2003) analyzes the indivisibility of sacred space, identifying four sources of conflict over sacred sites: religious groups splitting into rival branches, the layering of sacred spaces through successive conquests, competition with secular forces seeking to use the land for non-sacred purposes, and the control of sacred sites for political gain. Toft (2003) focuses on ethnic conflicts, arguing that peaceful agreements are more difficult to reach when ethnic groups view their territorial interests as indivisible. Building on the image losses literature, she argues that ethnic wars are more likely in multinational states where leaders worry about "precedent setting"; leaders in such settings seek to establish a strong reputation in dealing with one ethnic group that will deter future challenges by other groups. Her analyses show that ethnic wars are more likely when territory is viewed as indivisible by rebels or governments.

Thus, social science researchers have developed rich theoretical arguments linking issue intangibility, issue indivisibility, and violent conflict in world politics. Issues that are highly intangible and indivisible are thought to make bargaining more difficult, enhancing the chances that states will resort to militarized force. Next, we discuss the literature on territorial conflicts, considering how these general ideas might apply to this particular issue area.

## Tangibility, intangibility, and territorial issues

States contend over many issues in international politics, but territorial issues may be the most dangerous. Territorial issues have been associated with war more frequently than any other issue in world politics (Luard, 1986; Holsti, 1991), armed conflicts over territory are more likely to escalate, and territorial claims often create recurrent militarized conflict and enduring rivalries (Goertz and Diehl, 1992; Vasquez, 1995; Hensel, 1996; Huth, 1996; Senese, 1996; Mitchell and Prins, 1999; Vasquez and Henehan, 2001; Senese and Vasquez, 2003).

While the empirical evidence linking territorial disputes to militarized conflict is strong, theoretical explanations about *why* territorial issues are so conflict-prone vary. Early theorists emphasized contiguity, arguing that conflict is more likely between contiguous or nearby states, because of enhanced military reach and/or greater opportunities for interaction.[4] Vasquez (1995, p. 282) argues instead that the explanation lies in territoriality, "the tendency for humans to occupy and, if necessary, defend territory." Like other vertebrates, humans are aggressive in their attempt to keep and gain territory, and we should expect that "two states bordering on each other will use aggressive displays to establish a border in areas where they meet" (Vasquez, 1995, p. 282). However, territorial disagreements will not always lead to war; Vasquez contends that territorial disputes are only likely to end in war if disputants employ *realpolitik* strategies.

Studies of territorial conflicts have also been embedded in more general issue-based approaches (e.g. Vasquez, 1993; Hensel, 2001), which emphasize the salience of territorial issues to competitors.[5] On the one hand, territory may be important for its tangible or physical contents (e.g. Hill, 1945; Goertz and Diehl, 1992; Hensel, 1996, 2000). Examples include strategic territory that offers control of trade or communications routes or that could improve a state's military position relative to rivals, as well as territory that contains valuable resources (oil, minerals, or fresh water). Based on these tangible attributes, it would seem that territory should be easily divisible. If a territory is considered valuable for its oil deposits, an agreement might divide the territory or share the resource deposits under a joint sovereignty formula that allows both sides to develop and profit from the resources. The zero-sum nature of strategic territory may be a partial exception; if one side possesses the territory, it gains both better defensive positions and better positions for a potential offensive against its neighbor, while the neighboring state loses the same benefits. Yet even strategic territory might be divided with the aid of demilitarized zones, foreign

peacekeepers, or other security guarantees. In short, conflicts over territory valued largely for tangible benefits should be more amenable to peaceful settlement, because the parties should be able to locate a settlement that both would rationally prefer to war.

Yet the value of territory does not lie exclusively in its physical contents. Many territories are also valued for more intangible, psychological reasons (e.g. Hill, 1945; Murphy, 1990; Goertz and Diehl, 1992; Hensel, 1996, 2000). Territory can be seen as part of the national identity, particularly when it is populated by one's ethnic, linguistic, or religious compatriots or when there is a long history of one's countrymen living and dying there (Bowman, 1946; Luard, 1970). To the extent that such psychological considerations are involved, it should be difficult to find any mutually acceptable division. While an oil deposit might be shared, division is far less appealing for territory containing holy sites, the graves of one's ancestors, or one's ethnic kinsmen.

The bargaining literature discussed above helps to explain this relationship between intangible salience, bargaining failures, and interstate conflict. Territory valued largely for intangible reasons will result in greater image and reputation losses for leaders who make significant concessions, which will produce rigid bargaining. As in the car dealership scenario, two states contending over a piece of land that both value for psychological and historical reasons have incentives to stand firm in negotiations, and the land's intangible salience will reduce the set of mutually acceptable agreements. In short, peaceful agreements should be reached more often over divisible territorial issues (those valued primarily for tangible reasons) than over issues viewed as indivisible (high on intangible salience). This leads to our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:**

*Territorial issues with greater intangible salience are more difficult to resolve peacefully than territorial issues with primarily tangible salience.*

While territorial issues produce more frequent and severe militarized conflict than other contentious issues overall, we also expect issue tangibility to explain variance in conflict behavior. In particular, territorial issues that are valued for largely intangible reasons should produce more frequent and bloodier battles than territory valued for its tangible resources. Because intangible issues cannot be resolved easily through peaceful means, states are more willing to use force to protect their interests. Furthermore, they are more likely to exert great effort to win any conflicts that do arise because a zero-sum loss of an important territory will result in severe electoral and audience costs for the leader in the losing state. Tir (2003, p. 1240) makes a similar point:

> *Intangibly valued land is integral to the national identity ... and is therefore perceived as (1) personal, (2) indivisible, and (3) unsubstitutable ... Acquisition of, say, a holy site brings to the people a greater sense of reward than does, say, a coal mine, because the reward from tangibly valued land is, somewhat ironically, seen as more abstract. Hence, the people will be more likely to reward the leader who acquires intangibly ... valued land.*

Tir finds only mixed support for this hypothesis. Yet his analysis employs only a single measure of intangibility, ethnic ties to the territory. We agree with Tir's theoretical argument that militarized conflict will be more likely in claims to territory with high intangible salience, but we argue below that a fair test requires improved measures of both the tangible and intangible dimensions of salience. This leads to our next hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:**

*Territorial issues with greater intangible salience result in more frequent and severe militarized conflict than territorial issues with primarily tangible salience.*

### Identifying territorial issues and measuring territorial salience

In order to test these hypotheses, we analyze territorial claims data from the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) Project. An ICOW territorial claim occurs when "official representatives of at least one state make explicit statements claiming sovereignty over a piece of territory that is claimed or administered by another state." (Hensel, 2001, p. 90) The requirement of official government representatives excludes statements or actions by private individuals or organizations. The requirement of explicit statements excludes situations where outside observers suspect that a given action may have been motivated by the desire for territory; unless and until official government representatives explicitly claim sovereignty over the territory, a territorial claim can not be considered to exist. Furthermore, a territorial claim requires that the claim be made to a specific piece of territory.

Hensel (2001, pp. 90–94) offers more details on how the ICOW territorial claims data set is collected.[6] Data collection is currently complete for the Americas and Western Europe from 1816 to 2001, including 191 territorial claims to 122 distinct territories. Some territories have generated multiple claim phases involving different actors, as when the Guatemala-United Kingdom claim over British Honduras was replaced by a Guatemala-Belize claim upon the latter's independence.[7]

*Salience of territorial claims*

The salience of an issue refers to "the degree of importance attached to that issue by the actors involved" (Diehl, 1992, p. 334). With respect to territorial issues, this means the degree of importance attached to the specific territory that is under contention. The ICOW

project has collected data on a number of measures of salience for each territorial claim. Hensel (2001) aggregated these measures into a single index of the salience, but they can also be used to measure tangible and intangible salience separately. This study's analyses emphasize the separate measures of tangible and intangible salience, but also report results using the aggregated index for comparison with past research.

The *tangible* salience of territory can be measured in a number of different ways, but the ICOW territorial claims data set focuses on three. First, a given territory is more tangibly salient if it is known or believed to include potentially valuable resources such as oil, copper, iron ore, nickel, uranium, fresh water, or fisheries.[8] Second, a territory is considered to be more tangibly salient if it has a strategic location.[9] A location can be considered strategic for either military or economic reasons, ranging from important defensive positions or military bases to communication or trade routes, a route to the sea, or a warm water port. Finally, a territory is considered more tangibly salient when it sustains a permanent population – measured by the presence of permanent towns or villages – than when it is uninhabitable.

The ICOW territorial claims data set also includes three indicators that can be used to measure *intangible* salience. A given territory is considered more intangibly salient to a state that considers it part of the national homeland, rather than a colony or dependency. Colonies or other dependencies – while perhaps important to a state's prestige – are not part of the nation, and thus not accorded the same value. Second, a given territory is considered more intangibly salient to a state that has ethnic, linguistic, religious, or other identity ties to the territory and its residents. A territory that is only inhabited by members of other groups may be valuable because of its physical contents, but a territory that is inhabited by one's kinsmen has much greater value as part of the nation. Finally, a territory is more intangibly salient to a state that has previously exercised sovereignty over the territory than to one that has not done so. This is consistent with Bowman's (1946) argument about territory presenting an historical connection to one's ancestors. While territory that has never been ruled by a state might be valuable for other reasons, territory that has been under the state's sovereignty has greater value because of this connection to ancestral homes, buried ancestors, and other pieces of history.

The three indicators each for tangible and intangible salience of territory can be used to construct indexes of salience to measure the value of territory in a way that allows systematic testing of hypotheses. For tangible salience, all three indicators contribute for both the challenger and target state in a given claim, because either state could gain from the possession of oil fields, control over shipping lanes, or inhabitable land. For each of the three indicators that are present, two points are added to the index – one for each state – to produce a possible tangible salience range from zero to six.

For intangible salience, each of the three indicators contributes one point to the index for each state that is relevant, again producing a range from zero to six. Unlike tangible salience, it is possible – and indeed likely – that the two sides will have different values for one or more of the intangible indicators; one state may claim territory as part of its homeland that the other administers as a colony, one state may have had uninterrupted sovereignty for centuries while the other seeks to acquire the territory for the first time, and so on.[10] An overall salience index is constructed by adding both the tangible and intangible salience indicators together, producing a possible range of 0–12.[11]

Table 1 presents the frequencies for all six salience indicators across the 191 dyadic territorial claims in the Americas and Western Europe. Among the measures for tangible salience, populated area is the most common (71.7%), followed by strategic location (53.4%) and resource value (35.1%). For intangible salience, both sides are most likely to have homeland ties to the disputed territory (63.9%), followed by historical possession (45.0%) and identity ties (8.9%). Table 1 also presents summary statistics for these salience indicators and indexes across the 191 dyadic claims in the data set. The average claim has a tangible salience value of 3.20 out of 6, an intangible salience value of 3.26 out of 6, and an overall salience index score of 6.46 out of 12. Although the average values of the tangible and intangible salience measures are close to each other, the

*Table 1.* Measuring salience in dyadic territorial claims

| Measure | Claims where present | |
|---|---|---|
| (A) *Individual salience indicators* | | |
| **Tangible salience** | | |
| Populated area | 137/191 (71.7%) | |
| Resource value | 67/191 (35.1%) | |
| Strategic location | 102/191 (53.4%) | |
| **Intangible salience** | | |
| Homeland ties | | |
| Neither side | 10/191 (5.2%) | |
| One side | 59/191 (30.9%) | |
| Both sides | 122/191 (63.9%) | |
| Identity ties | | |
| Neither side | 144/191 (75.4%) | |
| One side | 30/191 (15.7%) | |
| Both sides | 17/191 (8.9%) | |
| Historical possession | | |
| Neither side | 22/191 (11.5%) | |
| One side | 83/191 (43.5%) | |
| Both sides | 86/191 (45.0%) | |

| Measure | Mean (S.D.) | Range |
|---|---|---|
| (B) *Aggregated salience indices* | | |
| Tangible salience index | 3.20 (1.89) | 0–6 |
| Intangible salience index | 3.26 (1.29) | 0–6 |
| For challenger | 1.53 (0.77) | 0–3 |
| For target | 1.73 (0.79) | 0–3 |
| Combined salience index | 6.46 (2.66) | 1–12 |
| For challenger | 3.13 (1.33) | 0–6 |
| For target | 3.33 (1.47) | 0–6 |

measures are not very highly correlated ($r = .37$), indicating that many claims that have high values on one do not have correspondingly high values on the other.[12]

It is instructive to follow the construction of this index using a well-known example. The Argentine claim to the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands dates to 1833, when British forces seized the islands from their Argentine governor.[13] The islands support a permanent population of several thousand residents. They do not have a strategic location, though, as they are not located near major shipping lanes and do not contribute heavily to either Argentine or British military capabilities. The islands have a clear resource value today, as nearby waters contain valuable fisheries and may contain extensive oil or hydrocarbon deposits, although this was not always the case. We date the beginning of the resource dimension to 1976, when both fisheries and oil exploration were mentioned as benefits of maintaining control over the islands in the British Foreign Office's Shackleton Report (Hastings and Jenkins, 1983, pp. 29–31).[14] The Falklands/Malvinas claim thus has a tangible salience score of 2 out of 6 for most of its history, based on its permanent population (which is counted for both claimants). In 1976, the addition of the resource dimension increases the salience score to 4 out of 6.

With respect to intangible salience, the islands are claimed as part of the Argentine homeland, but they are ruled as a British crown colony. They have an identity value for the British, as they have been populated by British citizens for well over a century, but there is no such value for the Argentines (who would like to populate the islands with Argentine nationals but have not done so). Finally, both Great Britain and Argentina have exercised sovereignty over the islands within the past two centuries – Argentina until 1833, and Britain ever since. Both Britain and Argentina thus have two points of intangible salience (Britain for the identity ties and current sovereignty, Argentina for the homeland claim and historical sovereignty), giving the claim an intangible salience score of 4 out of a possible 6. Adding the tangible and intangible scores together, the Falklands/Malvinas claim has a total salience index of 6 (out of 12 possible) for much of its history and 8 out of 12 since 1976, as compared to the mean value of 6.46 across the entire data set.

*Dependent variables*

The ICOW territorial claims data set includes data on attempts to manage or settle the issues involved in a claim ranging from bilateral negotiations to third party settlement to militarized conflict. The dependent variable for our first hypothesis is measured using the ICOW settlement attempt data, where each case is a distinct attempt to resolve a disputed territory peacefully. We measure whether a given settlement attempt produces an agreement between the claimants, and use this as an indicator of bargaining success. We include only negotiations that deal with the issue of sovereignty (over part or all of the claimed area), and exclude functional and procedural negotiations (Hensel, 2001).[15] In the Western Hemisphere and Western Europe, there were a total of 567 peaceful attempts to resolve territorial claims. Agreements were struck in 277 of these cases, or 49% of the time.

To evaluate our second hypothesis, we employ data on militarized conflict coded by the ICOW Project. While the analyses for success treat each peaceful settlement attempt as the unit of analysis, the analyses of militarized conflict employ annual dyadic data with one observation for each year that a claim was ongoing. For example, the Falklands claim has been ongoing from 1841 to 2001 (the last year that is currently included in the ICOW data), producing a total of 161 dyadic claim-years. In the Western Hemisphere and Western Europe, there are a total of 6058 dyadic claim-years.

For each year of an ongoing claim, ICOW identifies all militarized disputes where the claimants are on opposing sides, using version 3.02 of the Militarized Interstate Dispute data set (Ghosn et al., 2004). Historical sources are consulted to determine whether the militarized dispute in question was related directly to the territorial claim in question; disputes over non-territorial issues are excluded. Three measures of militarized conflict are utilized: the outbreak of any militarized dispute (196 disputes, in 3.24% of the annual observations), the outbreak of any militarized dispute with fatalities (45 disputes, 0.74%), and the outbreak of full-scale war involving 1000 or more battle deaths (23 disputes, 0.38%). These varying levels of dispute escalation are used to evaluate the severity portion of Hypothesis 2.

*Control variables*

We employ two control variables in all of our analyses, *Capability Disparity* and *Joint Democracy*. The former is measured as the percentage of the total dyadic capabilities held by the stronger side, which ranges from 0.5 to 1.0. Capabilities are measured by the Correlates of War (COW) project's Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) score, and capture each country's world share of industrial, demographic, and military capabilities (Singer et al., 1972). The latter variable takes on a value of one if both states in a dyad are democratic, scoring six or higher on the Polity IV democracy scale (Marshall and Jaggers, 2000). Finally, in the analyses for agreements, we also include two measures to distinguish between different types of settlement techniques, which might have different prospects for success. Separate dummy variables are used to indicate whether the settlement attempt involved a *Binding Third Party Technique* (arbitration or adjudication) or a *Non-binding Third Party Technique* (such as good offices, inquiry, conciliation, or mediation); the referent category that is left out is bilateral negotiations

between the adversaries without any third party involvement (Hensel, 2001).

## Empirical analyses

### Peaceful issue management

Our analyses begin with an analysis of bargaining success, examining whether parties are able to reach agreements to resolve territorial claims. Table 2 presents two logistic regression models: Model I employs the overall salience index that combines tangible and intangible elements, while Model II includes separate measures of tangible and intangible salience. The results in Model I are fairly intuitive, showing that increases in overall salience make it more difficult for claimants to reach an agreement. Substantive effects are presented in Table 3 and show that increasing the overall salience index from its minimum observed value in the data set (1) to its maximum (12) reduces the probability that two sides will reach an agreement by 0.171 (or by 56%).

Among the control variables, agreement is significantly more likely through binding third party activities ($p < 0.01$); non-binding third party activities do not have any greater success than the referent category of bilateral negotiations. Agreement is significantly less likely among democracies, consistent with work on credible commitments that suggests democracies are less likely to reach agreement in negotiations but are more likely to carry out their agreements (e.g. Hensel et al., 2005). Finally, relative capabilities do not have a systematic impact on the likelihood of agreement.

When separating the salience index into tangible and intangible dimensions, our theoretical expectation was that it would be more difficult to reach agreements over territory that is valued for largely intangible reasons, because image and reputation losses are heightened, and the range of acceptable bargains for both sides shrinks. The empirical results in Model II reveal, though, that

*Table 2.* Logistic regression analysis of agreement in peaceful settlement attempts

| Variable | Model I Est.(Robust S.E.) | Model II Est.(Robust S.E.) |
|---|---|---|
| *Issue salience* | | |
| Overall salience index | −0.09 (0.04)** | – |
| Tangible salience index | – | −0.27 (0.06)*** |
| Intangible salience index | – | 0.26 (0.09)*** |
| *Control variables* | | |
| Binding technique | 3.51 (0.76)*** | 3.42 (0.79)*** |
| Non-binding technique | −0.06 (0.23) | −0.21 (0.24) |
| Capability disparity | −0.13 (0.61) | −0.17 (0.64) |
| Joint democracy | −0.82 (0.25)*** | −0.83 (0.26)*** |
| Constant | 0.33 (0.61) | −0.03 (0.67) |
| Log likelihood | −340.78 | −328.90 |
| Improvement ($\chi^2$) | 36.10 ($p < 0.001$) | 52.82 ($p < 0.01$) |
| N | 563 | 563 |

*$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

*Table 3.* Marginal impact of salience on agreement

| Variable | Value | Probability (Change) |
|---|---|---|
| Overall salience index | 1 (min.) | 0.590 |
| | 6 (mean) | 0.432 (−0.162) |
| | 12 (max.) | 0.261 (−0.171) |
| Tangible salience index | 1 (min.) | 0.624 |
| | 3 (mean) | 0.462 (−0.162) |
| | 6 (max.) | 0.244 (−0.218) |
| Intangible salience index | 1 (min.) | 0.288 |
| | 3 (mean) | 0.379 (+0.091) |
| | 6 (max.) | 0.530 (+0.151) |

claimants are significantly *more* likely to reach agreement as the intangible salience of the territory increases and significantly *less* likely to do so as tangible salience increases. Raising the intangible salience index from 1 (minimum) to 6 (maximum) increases the chance of reaching agreement by 0.151 (or 84%), while the probability of reaching agreement over tangibly valued land drops by 0.218 (or 61%) when moving from the minimum to the maximum value on the index. The control variables have the same effects as in Model I.

Several possible explanations might account for these surprising results. For example, it may be that territorial claims in general have much higher intangible salience than other types of issues (Vasquez, 1993). If this is true, then differences in intangible salience between territorial claims would be less important than the more fundamental difference between territorial and other issues. Territories with greater tangible salience might thus be more difficult to manage peacefully regardless of these specific indicators of intangible salience, and most territorial claims would behave as "effectively indivisible" issues.

To test this, we compare the management of territorial claims with the management of another issue type that holds less intangible salience. The ICOW river claims data set (Hensel et al., 2006) offers one useful basis for comparison, in the form of explicit contention between states over the use of cross-border rivers. River issues are primarily tangible rather than intangible in nature, and they are more divisible on average than territorial issues, with more room for joint benefits to be achieved through cooperation over a shared water resource than over holy land or ancestral homelands. If river claims are added to Table 2, an additional dummy variable indicating the difference between territorial and river issues fails to reach statistical significance ($p < 0.19$). This suggests that there is no systematic difference between the management of territorial and river claims that is not already accounted for by our model, casting doubt on this potential explanation.[16]

Another potential explanation is that intangible salience – at least as measured here – does not make territory effectively indivisible, or otherwise impede peaceful settlement. If the intangible salience index is replaced in this model with the three individual

indicators that were used to construct it, only the measure of homeland attachment to the claimed territory has a significant and positive impact on agreement; states are significantly more likely to reach agreement in talks over territory that both consider part of their national homeland than in talks over territory that one or both claims as a colony or other dependency. This suggests that the distinction between homeland and dependent territory may not be as great as expected, or may not be as valid a measure of intangible salience as expected. It may be that more intensive approaches could be used to measure the intangible salience of claimed territories, much like Starr and Thomas' (2002) use of GIS techniques to measure what might effectively be considered the tangible salience of border areas.

It is also possible that, at least in some circumstances, states do have intangible attachment to non-homeland territories. For example, a state might see the acquisition of new colonies as vital to its international prestige, or a state with numerous colonies might see the retention of its existing possessions as vital to its reputation lest the loss of one colony lead to challenges to others (e.g. Hensel, 1996, 2000). In this regard, colonizers may act much like governments who fear the snowballing effect of challenges from ethnic groups inside the state (Toft, 2003; Walter, 2003). Better measures of the intangible salience of colonial possessions would be worth considering in the future.

These surprising results may also be due to a regional effect; the Americas and Western Europe might differ from the rest of the world in theoretically meaningful ways that can explain these findings. For example, it could be argued that the United States exerts a hegemonic influence within the Western Hemisphere, and that U.S. pressure produces agreements that otherwise might not have been reached. Adding a dummy variable for direct U.S. involvement in a settlement attempt as either a claimant or a third party does not change the results reported in Table 2, though, and the new variable is never statistically significant.[17] Nor is there evidence of an indirect hegemonic effect, whereby settlement attempts in a region with a clear hegemon are more successful even when the hegemon does not participate directly. A regional dummy variable indicates that there are no systematic differences between the Americas and Western Europe; this variable never reaches significance, and the other results do not change.

Even if U.S. hegemony cannot explain the relationship between intangible salience and agreement, these regions may differ from the rest of the world in other ways that promote peace. Research has shown that such factors as democracy, interdependence, and international institutions can help promote peace (e.g. Russett and Oneal, 2001), although this work has not directly examined peaceful conflict management. Western Europe is widely regarded as the region with the longest history of democracy, the greatest interdependence, and the most effective international institutions; similarly,

Latin America has a longer history of democracy and international institutions than Africa, Asia, or the Middle East. It appears unlikely that these factors account for this surprising finding, though, as democracy actually has a significant and negative effect on agreement in these two regions. Even in these relatively democratic regions, most countries were not democratic for most of the past two centuries, and particularly in Latin America there was relatively little intraregional trade for most of the period. While these factors may be able to help explain the relative lack of armed conflict in the latter half of the 20th century, they seem unable to account for the observed impact of intangible salience on agreement.

### Militarized conflict

While the results on agreement are surprising, the analyses for militarized conflict are more consistent with our expectations. Table 4 presents three models, with different dependent variables: the outbreak of any (territorial) militarized dispute, the outbreak of any fatal militarized dispute, and the onset of full-scale war. Table 5 presents the substantive effects for our key variables.

The top half of Table 4 employs the overall salience index, which performs as expected in all three models. As overall salience increases, militarized conflict is significantly more likely ($p < 0.01$ in all three models), which is consistent with past research; territorial issues are highly contentious, and lead to repeated and severe militarized conflict. The probability of fatal militarized disputes and interstate wars drops by nearly 100% when comparing the least to the most salient territorial issues.

The bottom half of the table separates the tangible and intangible salience indexes. We hypothesized that escalation would be more likely over territory valued for largely intangible reasons because the loss of such valuable land would impose great costs on leaders; the loss of a homeland or sacred space would be felt more acutely by the states' citizens than the loss of a tangible resource, such as an oil field. The results in Table 4 support this hypothesis. While tangible salience has a positive and significant effect on all three levels of militarized conflict (onset, onset of fatal MID, and onset of war), intangible salience has a positive effect on the most severe forms of conflict, fatal disputes and interstate wars, and the size of the effect is much larger for intangible than tangible salience. Table 5 shows that the probability of a fatal MID increases from 2 in 1000 to nearly 2 in 100 when the intangible salience index is raised from its minimum to its maximum, more than double the impact of tangible salience. The escalatory pattern for intangible issues is seen even more acutely for interstate wars. The probability of a war increases from only 1 in 1000 to 6 in 1000 as the tangible salience index moves from its minimum to its maximum. In contrast, the probability of a war onset is much greater for claims with high intangible salience (1.3 in 100) than for those with low intangible salience (1 in 1000).

*Table 4.* Logistic regression analysis of militarized conflict

| Variable | Model I: Outbreak of any militarized dispute Est. (Robust S.E.) | Model II: Outbreak of fatal militarized dispute Est. (Robust S.E.) | Model III: Outbreak of full-scale war Est. (Robust S.E.) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **(A) Overall salience index** | | | |
| *Issue salience* | | | |
| Salience index | 0.23 (0.03)*** | 0.35 (0.07)*** | 0.40 (0.10)*** |
| Control variables | | | |
| Capability disparity | −2.43 (0.47)*** | −2.27 (1.01)** | −0.59 (1.73) |
| Joint democracy | −0.53 (0.25)** | −0.80 (0.60) | −1.21 (1.02) |
| Constant | −2.94 (0.52)*** | −5.56 (1.22)*** | −7.86 (2.02)*** |
| N | 6021 | 6021 | 6021 |
| LL | −807.57 | −241.68 | −139.09 |
| $\chi^2$ (3 d.f.) | 127.04 ($p < 0.001$) | 65.67 ($p < 0.001$) | 27.66 ($p < 0.001$) |
| **(B) Tangible and intangible salience indices** | | | |
| *Issue salience* | | | |
| Tangible salience index | 0.33 (0.04)*** | 0.30 (0.09)*** | 0.31 (0.11)*** |
| Intangible salience index | −0.00 (0.06) | 0.47 (0.13)*** | 0.60 (0.23)*** |
| *Control variables* | | | |
| Capability disparity | −2.65 (0.48)*** | −2.11 (1.04)** | −0.31 (1.77) |
| Joint democracy | −0.57 (0.25)** | −0.79 (0.60) | − 1.22 (1.03) |
| Constant | −2.41 (0.53)*** | −5.88 (1.27)*** | −8.46 (2.19)*** |
| N | 6021 | 6021 | 6021 |
| LL | −799.24 | −241.29 | −138.49 |
| $\chi^2$ (4 d.f.) | 131.07 ($p < 0.001$) | 75.11 ($p < 0.001$) | 31.72 ($p < 0.001$) |

$*p < 0.10$; $**p < 0.05$; $***p < 0.01$.

The control variables also play an important role. The greater the disparity in relative capabilities between the claimants, the lower the probability of militarized conflict over the territorial claim; this is consistent with research showing the conflictual effects of parity (e.g. Kugler and Lemke, 1996). Similarly, jointly democratic dyads are significantly less likely to experience the onset of militarized conflict, consistent with democratic peace arguments (e.g. Russett and Oneal, 2001).[18]

In short, the results demonstrate that conflict over territorial claims is both frequent and bloody. However, the most dangerous contests are those that involve intangible salience, or psychological and emotional attachment to the land. Our results offer some reason for optimism, however. States competing over valuable homelands are willing to escalate to the level of deadly force to protect their interests, but they also seem to find ways to strike agreements. The policy implications are fairly clear. Outsiders should invest their energies in helping to resolve territorial claims where both sides have intangible attachment to the land, and these mediation efforts should focus on the identification of agreements that will be perceived as fair and equitable by both sides.

## Discussion

This study returns the study of contentious issues to its early roots, evaluating tangible and intangible issue salience. By focusing on one type of contentious issue, territorial claims, we are able to measure each case's salience on each dimension. This facilitates testing of propositions that in some cases date back more than three decades.

*Table 5.* Marginal impact of salience on militarized conflict

| Variable | Value | Fatal MIDs: Probability (Change) | Interstate wars: Probability (Change) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall salience index | 1 (min.) | 0.001 | 0.0003 |
| | 6 (mean) | 0.004 (+0.003) | 0.002 (+0.002) |
| | 12 (max.) | 0.037 (+0.033) | 0.026 (+0.024) |
| Tangible salience index | 1 (min.) | 0.002 | 0.001 |
| | 3 (mean) | 0.005 (+0.003) | 0.002 (+0.001) |
| | 6 (max.) | 0.011 (+0.006) | 0.006 (+0.004) |
| Intangible salience index | 1 (min.) | 0.002 | 0.001 |
| | 3 (mean) | 0.004 (+0.002) | 0.002 (+0.001) |
| | 6 (max.) | 0.017 (+0.014) | 0.013 (+0.011) |

Our results suggest that there are important differences between territorial issues with high tangible salience and those with high intangible salience, but that these differences are not always in the predicted direction. As expected, territorial issues with high values on either dimension of salience are more likely to lead to militarized conflict. Only tangible salience has a systematic impact on low-level militarized disputes, while intangible salience has a much stronger substantive impact than tangible salience on fatal militarized disputes or full-scale interstate wars. These empirical findings are consistent with past research, although our analyses have extended this research by separating tangible and intangible salience factors and employing improved measures of these concepts.

Contrary to many expectations, though, territorial issues with high intangible salience are more likely than others to produce agreements in peaceful settlement attempts, while those with high tangible salience are less likely to produce agreements. Bargaining theories are hard pressed to explain this result, as more indivisible issues should produce *fewer* agreements. To understand this result clearly, we need to examine the bargaining process more carefully. Did the agreement involve roughly even concessions, or did one side get more?[19] Did either party renege on a previous agreement over the issue at stake? How does a history of militarized conflict affect the ability of two states to reach agreements and the terms of agreements that are reached? Are agreements reached only after costly wars are fought? Are third parties involved, and if so, how do they influence the bargaining process? Are equitable agreements struck more readily over intangibly valued territory if external actors provide financial and military support? Understanding why intangibly valued land produces both costly wars and more frequent peaceful agreements is an important topic for future research and will entail examining the process of contentious issue bargaining more carefully.

It is possible that studying any one type of contentious issue will be unable to resolve the question of the relative influence of tangible and intangible salience, particularly if the territoriality argument is correct about human attachment to territory. Territorial issues seem to be best suited for addressing this question, because perhaps more than any other issue, they have the potential for both very high and very low values of each type of salience. It may be, though, that territorial issues on the whole are more salient – in a tangible and/or intangible sense – than most other types of issues over which states might contend. If this is the case, then variation within the broad category of territorial issues may be less important than variation between territory and other issues that lack such intangible salience. We have conducted one very preliminary comparison of the management of territorial and river issues in this paper, but much more remains to be done in this area.

## Notes

1. According to an issue-based perspective, policy makers are concerned with issues because of the *values* that issues represent. Mansbach and Vasquez (1981, pp. 57–58) describe politics as the quest for value satisfaction, where *values* are abstract and intangible ends such as wealth, physical security, freedom/autonomy, peace, order, status, or justice. Because many such values cannot be obtained directly, political actors often pursue desired values by contending over *stakes*, which are more concrete and tangible objects that are seen as possessing or representing the desired values. One or more stakes and values are linked to form an *issue*, or "a set of differing proposals for the disposition of stakes among specific actors" (Vasquez, 1993, p. 46; see also Rosenau, 1971, p. 141).

2. Rosenau (1971) proposed a typology of contentious issues based on the tangibility of the issue's ends, or "the values which have to be allocated" (1971, p. 145), and the tangibility of the means "which have to be employed to effect allocation" (1971, p. 145). "Tangibility is...whether a stake's end can be photographed and its means purchased...Intangible ends are those that cannot be seen directly, such as prestige, status, and rights. A tangible means...must be purchased before it can be used; thus troops or money are tangible. Intangible means are...verbal actions, such as diplomatic communications or negotiations, or nonverbal actions of diplomatic personnel" (Vasquez, 1983, p. 181).

3. Hassner (2003, pp. 12–13) points out that economists tend to view issues as indivisible if the goods involved would be destroyed if they were divided. He argues that many political issues at stake are not goods and they are often nonfungible, thus he prefers to define indivisibility on the basis of *integrity* (issue cannot be divided or subdivided without lowering its value), *boundaries* (parties must refer to the same issue), and *nonfungibility* (the issue cannot be substituted or exchanged for something else).

4. There is a large literature that finds a positive empirical relationship between contiguity and militarized conflict (see Most et al., 1989; Simowitz, 1998; Starr and Siverson, 1998; and Vasquez, 1995).

5. For example, Hensel (2001) finds that territorial conflicts are more likely to produce bilateral negotiations and militarized conflict if they are highly salient, and less likely to produce binding third party settlements.

6. The ICOW Project collects this information from a variety of sources including general geographic and historical reference sources at the regional or global level, military and diplomatic histories of the participants, and news reports from sources such as the *New York Times, Times* of London, and *Facts on File*.

7. Downloadable data and documentation are available at < http://www.icow.org > .

8. This variable is coded based on what was known (or suspected) at the time of the claim, so oil that is discovered after the end of a claim would not qualify. It is important to note that official government representatives must have been aware of the claim, and must have explicitly seen the resources as a desirable attribute of the territory in question.

9. The resource and strategic value variables are similar to Huth's (1996) measures of economic and strategic value, which were used similarly by Tir (2003).

10. It could be argued that this use of dummy variables is inappropriate to measure the salience of a given territory for each claimant; it might be preferable to estimate the value of resource deposits, either in absolute terms or relative to each country's supplies or needs. The level of detail that this requires would be difficult to obtain even for very recent points in time, when Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data sets provide some of the needed data. Before the mid-1990s, though, there are no reliable data sources that could be used to estimate the resource contents or other tangible attributes of each claimed territory. With the ICOW project's goal of measuring the salience of every claimed territory since 1816, it would be impossible to quantify the various salience indicators in any meaningful sense over this long time frame. It is also worth noting that the other major data set in this area, Paul Huth's (1996) territorial disputes data, uses the same approach of coding dummy variables to measure the value of claimed territories.

11. Hensel's (2001) original salience index included one other indicator: a measure of mainland versus offshore territory, based on the intuition that a given territory on the mainland would be more salient (ceteris paribus) than an equivalent territory located offshore. While we still believe this to be generally true, the value of islands may be changing over time with the development of the Law of the Sea, and our measure of historical sovereignty over a given piece of territory offers the additional advantage of improving the measurement of the intangible salience of territory. In any case, the two salience indexes are highly correlated ($r = 0.94$, $p < 0.001$) and lead to identical conclusions in our analyses.

12. It could be argued that using an aggregated index for the salience of an entire claim is undesirable, because this could mask the difference between a dyad where both states have moderate salience values and a dyad where one state has a high salience value and its opponent has a low value. In practice such disparities in salience between the claimants are unlikely, as the three tangible salience indicators (economic resources, strategic location, and populated area) count equally toward both sides' salience for the territory. The salience scores for the challenger and target states are highly correlated ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that this problem is quite rare.

13. Note that the Falklands territorial claim does not enter the ICOW data set until 1841, when Argentina qualifies as a sovereign state according to the Correlates of War interstate system.

14. As further evidence that both fishing and oil exploration are seen as important, the UK and Argentina have held numerous rounds of talks since the mid-1980s over the exploitation of fishery and/or oil resources in waters between the islands and Argentina.

15. Functional settlements deal with the usage of the claimed territory, but do not resolve the question of ownership, while procedural settlements identify procedures for how the parties will attempt to resolve things in the future.

16. Most of the indicators of river claim salience reflect tangible salience: use of the river for navigation, hydroelectric power, irrigation, water supply for populated areas, and resource extraction; the only indicator of river claim salience that addresses intangible value is the same homeland/dependency distinction described above for territorial claims. Intangible salience of river claims thus ranges from 0 to 2 (with one point for each country through whose homeland territory the river runs), while tangible salience ranges from 0 to 10 (with one point per country for each of the five indicators); for comparability with territorial claims, this tangible salience index is multiplied by 0.6 to produce a range from 0 to 6.

17. A contingency table analysis further questions the impact of U.S. activity on agreements. Agreements are reached in 39.5% of the settlement attempts that involved the U.S. as a third party, and in 40.5% of the attempts that did not ($\chi^2 = 0.01$, 1 d.f., $p < 0.92$). Agreements are also reached in 39.5% of the settlement attempts that involved the U.S. as a claimant and 40.6% of the attempts that did not ($\chi^2 = 0.05$, 1 d.f., $p < 0.83$).

18. Joint democracy has a significant effect on militarized dispute onset, but is insignificant in the escalation models (onset of fatal MIDs or wars). This is consistent with Reed's (2002, p. 91) empirical estimates from a selection model of dispute onset and escalation; "jointly democratic dyads avoid war because they rarely become involved in militarized disputes."

19. Pruitt's (1971) argument suggests that if *both* sides could make concessions simultaneously, their image and reputation losses could be minimized, and an acceptable agreement could be struck (see also Rubin and Brown, 1975).

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