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978-0-521-70761-9 - Strategic Rivalries in World Politics: Position, Space and Conflict
Escalation

Michael P. Colaresi, Karen Rasler, and William R. Thompson

Excerpt

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Part I

About strategic rivalries

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1 An introduction to strategic rivalries

The advent of explicit interstate rivalry analysis in the past few years has raised serious questions about the wisdom of assuming that any two states have an equal probability of engaging in war. Most wars are related to protracted, ongoing conflicts between long-term adversaries and rivals. A very small number of rivalry dyads, therefore, are disproportionately responsible for a great deal of interstate conflict. Strategic rivalries, in turn, are relationships in which decision-makers have singled out other states as distinctive competitors and enemies posing some actual or potential military threat.¹ It is not unusual for state leaders to perceive threats from states with which they do not feel particularly competitive. The Israel–Lebanon dyad is a good example. Israeli decision-makers may feel threatened by activities that originate within Lebanese space but they do not worry much about an attack from the Lebanese army. Should Israel decide to attack targets in Lebanon, there is little the Lebanese state *per se* can do to deter such attacks.

It is also not unknown for two states to be competitive without appearing to pose a military threat. The French–German dyad, after 1955, provides another illustration. Both states compete for leadership in the European Union, as well as elsewhere, but they no longer regard each

¹ Strategic rivalries should not be confused with enduring rivalries that are identified by specifying some number of militarized interstate disputes occurring within a finite interval of time, as in Diehl and Goertz (2000) or Maoz and Mor (2002). For most questions pertaining to rivalry formation and conflict escalation, we prefer a conceptual approach, outlined in Chapter 2, that is independent of a dyad's militarized dispute history. Strategic rivalries can be formed in the absence of any militarized disputes. Whether militarized disputes are involved in their escalation to higher conflict levels are separate theoretical and empirical questions that are difficult to pursue if one starts with some level of dispute density. The use of dispute densities also asks a different question by focusing on moving from a state of affairs below the threshold to above it. That is a question about why some dyads engage in more disputes in a short period of time than others do. If strategic rivalries do not necessarily engage in any militarized interstate disputes, information on dispute densities is unlikely to help account for their formation. To the extent that escalation is about fighting more often, it would be extremely awkward to try to explain an increase in dispute behavior in dispute-density terms.

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other as threats to their respective national security. Rivalry requires the combination of competition and the perception of threat from an enemy. The US-USSR-dominated Cold War is the outstanding illustration in recent world politics. The Cold War ended, from the US perspective, when the Soviet Union was perceived to be no longer either particularly competitive or threatening to the United States.²

Calling pairs of states “strategic rivals” is one thing. Explaining the dynamics of their relationships is quite another. While ground is certainly gained by recognizing rivals when we find them, the real question is what difference rivalry relationships make to world politics. Answering this question is what this book is mainly about. But before outlining how we proceed to generate our answer, some further illustration of what sort of phenomena we are attempting to explain is in order. Brief summaries of four rivalries should help in this regard. Moving from west to east, we will quickly scan the behavior of Ecuador–Peru, Greece–Turkey, India–Pakistan, and the two Koreas, focusing primarily on the relationship of the pairs of rivals – as opposed to various types of participation in the conflicts by actors outside the rivalry. The immediate question is what do these dyadic relationships seem to have in common?

We think that there are at least four common denominators that are susceptible to analysis, generalization, and theory-building/testing.

First, these strategic rivalries are competing over largely unresolved, distinctive goal incompatibilities. Both sides want things that the other side denies them and they have not devised a way to compromise. Second, the competitive actions within each rivalry combine to form a stream of conflict, rather than wholly separable events. Third, this stream of conflict alters the way objective events are perceived, increasing the escalatory potential of even presumably innocuous events. Adversaries believe that they have ample reason to mistrust the opposite side. Fourth, there is considerable variation in the intensity of competition over time in each case, as conflict is punctuated with periods of cooperation.

Four illustrations

Peru–Ecuador

In 1995, Peru and Ecuador fought a war on the Cenepa River. Exactly how many people died remains unclear but the death count probably

² With the advantage of hindsight, one can argue that the USSR was much less competitive than it seemed all along. But what matters is how decision-makers perceive the extent of competitiveness and threat at the time – not what we may conclude years later.

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ranged between 500 and 1,500, with perhaps the lower number coming closest to the actual body count. Between 1995 and 1999, Peru and Ecuador then negotiated what appears to represent a compromise agreement that both sides appear to find reasonably satisfactory. A resumption of intense conflict, now, seems unlikely.³

The basic issue that had divided the two South American states was a combination of ambiguous boundaries and access to the Amazon Basin. Between 1824 and 1830 first Peru and then Ecuador emerged as independent states. From the outset, their boundaries were disputed and occasionally fought over. Wars between Peru and Ecuador were fought in 1859–60 (although not over boundaries) and 1941. Two crises in 1981 and 1991 might have erupted into full-scale wars but did not due in part to external mediation. Peru thought that the 1941 war outcome had resolved decisively the question of boundary delineation in their favor. Ecuadorians did not see it that way and, in fact, resented the coercion exerted successfully against them in 1941. There also remained some remote areas in which the exact boundary demarcation was less than clear.

Boundary disputes in South America were numerous in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ambiguous borders were inherited from the Spanish and Portuguese imperial era and few South American states initially had much capability to resolve these questions. Those states with more capability tended to take disputed territories away from weaker states. Both Peru and Ecuador could claim that they had lost territory to stronger neighbors in the past and were unenthusiastic about suffering any more losses.

Over the years, moreover, a distinctive behavioral pattern had emerged in boundary dispute processes. Protracted negotiations, punctuated by military clashes, and a return to negotiations were one dimension of this pattern. Another facet is revealed by Klepak's (1998: 76) summary evaluation of the nature of Latin American boundary negotiations: "a great deal of talking and little concrete action." Still another characteristic of these interactions is that some sort of military presence in the disputed area was considered useful (Herz and Pontes Nogueira, 2002). This meant that both sides would attempt to insert patrols and small military camps or posts in disputed areas. From time to time, these detachments would collide in contested space with one or both sides claiming that their competitors were attempting to expand their control into the sovereign territory of

³ This sort of statement is always highly vulnerable to being contradicted by activities in the real world. Rivalries often de-escalate and terminate only gradually. Sporadic conflicts of low intensity should not be ruled out in the winding-down phase.

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the other state. Any such clash had some potential for escalation, depending on how quickly reinforcements could arrive and some inclination to press the issue. In this fashion, even previously negotiated settlements might be overturned if the losing side decided its chances of doing better had improved (Klepak, 1998).

Each of the incidents in 1981, 1991, and 1995 began with some military movement into contested space. One difference in 1995 may have been that the Ecuadorians were better prepared for and, as a consequence, more ready to engage in a military confrontation than they had been in earlier encounters. While both sides allowed the clash to escalate into something bigger, the Ecuadorians remained aware of Peruvian military superiority and were open to negotiations.⁴ Some military maneuvering continued in the next few years but a compromise emerged that gave Peru the definitive boundary it desired while also allowing Ecuador access to the Amazon Basin. It probably also helped that Ecuadorians felt that they had avenged their defeat in 1941 by exhibiting more martial competence in 1995 than had previously been the case (Klepak, 1998).

Greece–Turkey

Turkey and Greece have not fought a war recently although they have approached the brink on more than one occasion in the past several decades.⁵ The two states have the rare distinction of actually having resolved earlier tensions in the 1930s as greater threats loomed. But they fell back into a relationship of mutual threat and recriminations after the mid-1950s changes in the future status of Cyprus. Since that time, militarized clashes and major crises have punctuated the relations of the two states that also happen to be members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and therefore allies.

For Greece, Turkey is the former colonial power from whom independence had to be gained the hard way. From the outset of independence in the early nineteenth century, Greek decision-makers have also been devoted to the idea of bringing all Greeks within a Greek state. Most of the target population for this irredentism happened to reside in Turkish territory. Greek expansion, therefore, could only occur at the expense of the Turks. Yet even as this problem had begun to recede in the second half of the twentieth century, Cyprus with its predominantly Greek population but with a sizeable Turkish minority emerged from British

⁴ A fourth characteristic of Latin American boundary disputes is that both sides, once engaged in a military confrontation, seem to be particularly open to third party intervention/mediation.

⁵ Greece and Turkey fought wars in 1897, 1912–13, 1917–18, and 1919–22.

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control as a continuing symbol of the possibilities of Greek unification. The Turkish reaction to the threat of a plot to link Cyprus closely to Greece in 1974 led to a Turkish military occupation of northern Cyprus. From the Turkish point of view, Cypriot schemes reflected attempts at continuing Greek expansion at Turkish expense. From the Greek point of view, the Turkish occupation provided new evidence of Turkish predation and coercive aggression. Turkey ascended to the head of the list of Greek security threats as a consequence.

Subsequent frictions over the legal status of the Aegean and the definition of airspace and territorial waters escalated in the 1980s and 1990s. Greeks perceive Turkish interference with the rights accorded to the many outlying Greek islands near the Turkish coast. The Turkish perspective is that Greece wants to transform the Aegean into a Greek lake. Add to this formula for continuing foreign problems, the existence of a small and historically not well-treated, Turkish minority within Greece. From the Turkish perspective, these compatriots deserve protection from Greek repression. From the Greek perspective, the minority has frequently been seen as a potential fifth column that represents an internal security threat.

Greco-Turkish relations have improved in the past few years in part because both states desire a closer relationship with the European Union. To achieve better linkages to Europe, a variety of images and reflexes have to be moderated. EU members are expected to be democratic political systems with civilian control over the military. Economic growth and stability should be a primary state goal. High defense costs and feuding over adjacent territory are most undesirable. The altered regional environment – Yugoslav disintegration, new states, old communist states struggling to develop new foreign policies – has also contributed both to new venues for Greco-Turkish competition and a rationale for more cautious behavior. Yet while both states appear to be becoming more closely linked to Europe, significant resistance on both sides remains to resolving the major Greco-Turkish grievances. Some Greek observers (Dokos and Tsakonas, 2003: 16) have attributed this reluctance primarily to inertial opposition in Ankara while Turkish observers (Sonmezoglu and Ayman, 2003: 39) point to what they describe as a Greek tendency to tangle with Turkey as “like an addiction, a routine, a way of political life for Greece.” It is the one constant upon which most politicians and parties of various ideological stripes can agree.

India–Pakistan

Since their independence shortly after World War II, India and Pakistan have fought four wars and appear to have come close to going to war on

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several other occasions.⁶ In many respects, the two states represent the odd couple of South Asia, if not the world. India is one of the largest states in the world and has always possessed a substantial military capability advantage over smaller Pakistan. Thanks in part to more than a half century of competition with the leading state in its region, Pakistan is a weak state with an even weaker economy. India, in contrast, has remained surprisingly democratic and entertains aspirations of participating in the twenty-first century's development of high technology. One attribute they both share now is that they are also armed with nuclear missiles. As a consequence, they have the greatest potential for testing the debated notion that nuclear weapon proliferation will deter small state warfare.

The British partition of South Asia into primarily Hindu and Muslim areas led to the independence of India and Pakistan, with several major caveats. One is that partition led to a mass migration of people from one part of South Asia to other parts that were deemed less hostile, thereby practically ensuring Hindu–Muslim conflict from the outset. A second problem concerned the nature of British control of South Asia. In most parts of the sub-continent, it had become the direct ruler. In a few enclaves, its rule was officially more indirect via native princes. These princes were invited to choose between the two new states in 1948. Most did on the basis of co-religious and/or geographical principles. A few balked. One of these princely states, Jammu and Kashmir, has remained a contentious issue for India and Pakistan ever since.

One initial structural problem was that the Kashmiri prince was Hindu while most of his population was Muslim. He declined to choose between India and Pakistan until a local tribal rebellion with Pakistani support forced him to seek Indian military assistance. The price for the military support was adhering to India. The Kashmiri fighting escalated into the first war between India and Pakistan without a clear resolution. Both sides ended up holding onto the territory that they controlled at the time of the 1948 cease-fire.

After 1948, Indo-Pakistani troop maneuvering and probes along their mutual borders occasionally escalated into major troop mobilizations and crisis situations (1950–1, 1965, 1987, 1990, 1999, 2001). In 1965 and 1999, Pakistani probes expanded into higher levels of warfare but without ever resolving the question of control of Kashmir.⁷ Another war broke out in 1971 over the non-Kashmiri issue of Pakistani control over what was once East Pakistan. A separatist movement/civil war prompted Indian

⁶ Ganguly (2001) argues that the Kargil fighting in 1999 exceeded the minimal death count required for wars and therefore should be regarded as the fourth Indo-Pakistani war.

⁷ In addition, Kashmir is subject to its own internal conflict dynamic that interacts with the preferences and schemes of various external actors.

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military intervention that led to the capitulation of Pakistani forces and, ultimately, to the creation of Bangladesh.

Indo-Pakistani relations move back and forth between overt tensions and hostility and discussions about de-escalating their feuding history. The threat of nuclear warfare has added an extra dimension since the late 1990s without necessarily leading to more cooperation. Indeed, the Pakistani decision to develop a nuclear capability is thought to have stemmed from its defeat by India in 1971 and the perceived need for an equalizer. Otherwise, the overall capability gap between India and Pakistan has continued to grow in India's favor. While this expanding chasm and the nuclear dimension should make Indo-Pakistani warfare less likely, it does not seem to have worked that way between 1947 and 1999. It remains unclear whether much has changed substantially in the early twenty-first century.

People's Democratic Republic of Korea–Republic of Korea

Japan's surrender in World War II led to the presence of Soviet troops in the northern part of the Korean peninsula and US forces in the south. Without much apparent premeditation or discussion, this ad hoc division became more concrete when two Korean states were announced in 1948. Both states claimed legitimacy as the sole Korean state. The North and South also professed genuine interests in reunification. However, the division institutionalized a more industrialized North characterized by a Marxist regime organized around Kim Il Sung and an agrarian South ostensibly operating eventually within a relatively democratic regime that has oscillated between civilian and military rule over the last half-century.

In 1950, the better-armed North attempted a coercive reunification of the Korean peninsula. Three years of highly destructive warfare ensued that brought in military intervention by the United States and China, among other states. The 1953 armistice merely solidified the cleavage between the two Koreas. It also forced both sides to devote considerable resources to repairing the wartime devastation for the next twenty years. Initially, the more industrialized Northern economy was more successful in realizing growth but developed serious problems in the 1970s while at the same time it lost some of its external support and suffered from a string of environmental catastrophes. Southern industrialization and economic growth was initially slower but ultimately more spectacular and certainly successful in establishing a modern, competitive economy.

Throughout these economic gains and vicissitudes, the bilateral relations between the two Koreas have alternated between episodes of relative harmony and negotiations toward reunification and intense hostility.

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Their history is also characterized by an unusually long series of Northern raids and incursions, listed in Table 1.1, that have always stopped short of a resumption of warfare. At the same time, both sides have maintained large military forces and prepared for a renewed outbreak of intense conflict – mitigated primarily by the presence of a large number of US troops stationed in the South intended to serve as a deterrent to another Northern invasion.

In the past decade or so, international attention has focused on North Korean attempts to build nuclear weapons that could threaten Japan and even the United States. At the same time, the Northern economy has continued to deteriorate and political control was passed from father to Kim Jong Il, his son. Even so, the two Koreas continue to talk about reunification while preparing for the possibility of renewed warfare either of an intra-Korean nature or, possibly, a US preemptive strike on the North.⁸ North Korean incursions into South Korean territory have also continued. Yet South Korean official strategy persists in downplaying the threat presented by the North. A greater concern, perhaps peculiar to the Korean peninsula, is that the Kim regime might collapse thereby causing more problems for the South (and prematurely accelerating reunification) than if the Kim regime survived.

Common denominators

What, if anything, do these four cases share? There are actually several common traits in evidence. One is that these state pairs have fought repeatedly. In all four cases, the pairs have regarded their rival as an adversary from the independence of one or both states. Two of the cases date from the early nineteenth century while the other two emerged shortly after the conclusion of World War II. The main reason that they conflict repeatedly is a second shared trait. Whatever the issues that strain their relationship, they have been unable to resolve completely the source(s) of conflict. The most obvious exception appears to be the Ecuadorian–Peruvian case, which may well have resolved their long-running boundary dispute at long last. The Greeks and Turks were able to terminate their traditional rivalry in the 1930s only to have it flare up again in the 1950s. The Greco-Turkish rivalry has de-escalated in the early twenty-first century and may be in the process of terminating. The Koreans presumably will have protracted yet probably constrained conflict as long as there are

⁸ Manyin (2002) notes four “thaws” in inter-Korean relations (1972, 1985, early 1990s, and 2000). North Korea, however, had also been publicly announcing the need for peaceful reunification when it launched its invasion in 1950.

Table 1.1 *Korean interactions*

Activity	Year
Establishment of the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea	1948
Korean War	1950–3
South Korean plane hijacked to North Korea	1958
Shooting incident on demilitarized zone (DMZ)	1966
South Korean frigate sunk, shooting incidents along DMZ, North Korean gunboat sunk	1967
South Korean fishing vessels captured by North; Northern commando raid on South Korean presidential palace unsuccessful; North Korean spy vessel captured by South; North Korean guerrilla raid on eastern coast	1968
Several North Korean ships suspected of infiltration sunk or captured; South Korean plane hijacked to North	1969
South Korea captures infiltration ship and kills agents setting explosives	1970
North Korean assassination attempt on South Korean president kills the wife of the president	1973
Discovery of DMZ Northern infiltration tunnel announced	1974
North–South maritime clash in the west; discovery of another infiltration tunnel announced	1975
Shooting incident on DMZ; Southern aircraft hijacked to North	1977
Another infiltration tunnel discovery announced	1978
North Korean spy rings arrested	1979
North Korean spy rings arrested	1982
A number of South Korean politicians killed in Myanmar bombing attributed to North Korea and presumably focused on South Korean president; North Korean spy rings arrested	1983
South Korean air liner blown up, possibly linked to Olympic Games, later attributed to North Korea	1987
Another infiltration tunnel discovery announced	1990
North Korean army incursion in DMZ; North Korean espionage submarine runs aground on east coast of South Korea	1996
Military intrusion and exchange of fire across DMZ	1997
North Korean submarine trapped in fishing nets off South Korean east coast; North Korean vessel sunk	1998
Serious naval clashes by North and South Korean gunboats in Yellow Sea linked initially to crabbing activities	1999
North Korea threatens military retaliation if US and South Korea enter Yellow Sea area claimed by North Korea	2000
Twelve North Korean intrusions into South Korean waters and exchange of fire across the DMZ	2001
Continued naval intrusions and clashes	2002
North Korea threatens to abandon 1953 Korean War armistice if US imposes trade sanctions	2003

Source: Hoare and Pares (1999: 231–40); updated using Oberdorfer (2001), Manyin (2002), and Nanto (2003).