

Order and Disorder across Geopolitical Space
The Effect of Declining Dominance on Interstate Conflict

Abstract

While scholars have long noted that violent conflicts appear to cluster in certain geographic spaces, we propose that the underlying contextual cause behind this empirical finding is the presence or absence of *dominance vacuums*, where hierarchical relationships between states are unclear. The absence of a dominant state within these vacuums provides greater opportunity for all other states to engage in substantial conflicts in pursuit of their foreign policy objectives. Building on recent research that re-conceptualizes capabilities and hierarchy to incorporate the influence of geography, we provide a key contribution to hierarchical approaches to international politics by identifying geographical areas with a greater propensity toward conflict. We test this approach to conflict through a series of statistical analyses using different units of analysis and provide findings suggesting that within dominance vacuums the odds of observing a conflict between states more than triple

Introduction

Western Europe was one of the bloodiest geographical places during the 19th and early 20th centuries; today, it is one of the most peaceful and cooperative spaces in the history of the modern state system. Border conflicts in the nineteenth century between newly formed post-colonial states in the Western Hemisphere have mostly changed to patterns of economic interdependence and cooperation. Following the termination of the Cold War, East Asia has emerged as a more peaceful region despite unresolved and ongoing territorial disputes. In contrast to these regional transformations, the Middle East and Central Asia continue to be geopolitical spaces of recurring conflict and violence, despite substantial efforts by major powers to bring tranquility to these regions. How might a geopolitical space, nested in ongoing, brutal conflicts for centuries, suddenly emerge as a region of peace while other regions continue, or emerge into, a cycle of conflict? In this effort we present one argument to account for these geopolitical patterns. We suggest that a key contextual contribution to this puzzle is the presence or absence of *dominance vacuums*, where hierarchical relationships do not dominate in a particular geopolitical space.

Waltz's (1979) key assumption regarding anarchy in international politics has been strongly contested by structural approaches that focus instead on the salience of hierarchy in the international system. Exemplified by the work of scholars that include Lake (2002; 2010), Rasler and Thompson (1994), Organski and Kugler (1984), and Lemke (2002), much of this research argues that dominant states, either major powers or regional powers, seek to create order and establish hierarchical arrangements. Their dominant power—over either the entire system or smaller geographical spaces—often creates a deterrent against numerous forms of conflict between states. The ebbs and flows in established global and/or regional hierarchies (and the

growth or decline in the relative power of major powers) may then explain much about the conditions under which conflicts are likely to occur.

Existing structural theories offer two typical drawbacks. First, they often address dynamics that are restricted to a small group of major powers and contenders, dismissing much else that forms the contours of international politics. Second, they offer explanations that appear to be too deterministic, failing to take into account the broad range of other considerations, especially at the regional, dyadic, and monadic levels of analysis, that have been identified as strong determinants of conflict behavior. There is a rich literature and strong empirical findings relating conflict onset to the presence of democracy (Dixon, 1994; Farber and Gowa 1995; Gleditsch and Hegre 1997), democratization (Ward and Gleditsch 1998; Mansfield and Snyder 2002), commercial interdependence (Barbieri 1996; Gartzke 1998, 2007; Oneal, Russett, and Berbaum 2003; Russett and Starr 2008), and relative capabilities (Bueno de Mesquita 1980; Doran 1991; Kim 1996).

Often implicitly related to structural hierarchical theories, there is also a long history in the study of international politics that has focused on the salience of geopolitics and regions in international affairs. Starting at least with MacKinder (1904), geopolitical conflicts have been emphasized in the literature, and with the end of the Cold War they have reemerged once more (Blagden et al. 2011; Rosato 2011; Bergesen 2012). The study of regions, as geopolitical spaces, also has a long history, although theorizing has been hampered by major quarrels over definitions, analytical frameworks, and the consequent absence of a rigorous typology that would meaningfully differentiate geographical spaces (Breslin and Higgot 2000; Acharya 2007; Nolte 2010). Nevertheless, most large-N studies of conflict, when controlling for region—nearly

regardless of the type of regional specification—often find substantial differences in conflicts across regional groupings (e.g. Solingen 2007).

Our purpose in this effort is to underscore the *contextual salience* of hierarchical structural considerations in the analysis of interstate conflicts and to suggest their linkages to geopolitical spaces and regions. In establishing such contextual salience, we augment other findings about the drivers associated with interstate conflict. For instance, we accept Vasquez' (1995) argument that most conflicts are driven by territorial issues. Our theoretical contribution is to show that the most likely physical places where such territorial issues explode into conflict are geopolitical places and spaces where dominant hierarchies are minimized. Likewise, we suggest that while numerous differences between regions matter, a critical contextual consideration between regions is the extent of hierarchical dominance (either global or regional) covering the designated geopolitical space.

Note that in linking hierarchical effects with geopolitical spaces, we seek to apply the common underlying structure behind contending hierarchical theories, without choosing a specific theoretical perspective. We accept for instance the value of Lake's (2011) conceptualization of hierarchy in understanding geopolitical areas in international affairs and the value of power transition theory in its application to geopolitical spaces (Lemke 2002), without necessarily accepting the focus of the research (conflict over global leadership by rising powers) or the causal drivers (relative parity combined with high dissatisfaction). Instead, we employ a delineation of hierarchical structure to highlight the importance of contextual considerations in the analysis of patterns of international conflict (and cooperation) based on a variety of theories of international politics.

We do not dispute that conflict emerges from substantial differences in foreign policy preferences between states. However, we suggest that whether those preferences are driven by regime differences (democratic peace theory), lack of mutual payoffs from the status quo (commercial peace theory), or other phenomena that differentiate and drive policy makers toward conflicts, the proclivity to engage in conflict toward one another is significantly conditioned by systemic *context*: the extent of hierarchical dominance under which such state actors conduct their affairs and pursue their differences.

Our contribution to the literature is to not only underscore but also integrate the *context* of power distribution across geographical space at the system level with other explanations of conflict at other levels of analysis. In doing so, we reintroduce what some have observed before us: that conflicts tend to cluster within specific geographic spaces (MacKinder 1904; Cohen 1973, 1982, 1991; Hensel and Diehl 1994). Unlike hegemonic stability, power transition, or global leadership theories, however, we do not focus on the creation of order and hierarchy as much as its absence: where hierarchical dominance is minimized and where major powers are least able to control, we identify dominance vacuums where conflict is most likely to occur, all other things being equal.

We extend the logic of theories rooted in systemic hierarchy beyond the interactions of major powers to all states in the international system, residing within geographic spaces characterized by structural considerations ranging around the extent of hierarchical dominance. We proceed first by laying the foundation of dominance vacuum theory within the conflict, political geography, and hierarchy literatures. Second, we provide a detailed explanation of the operationalization of our concepts. Third, we provide illustrations of dominance vacuums at two historically salient time periods and discuss the implications of our approach. Finally, we show

support for our predictions through three logit models using separate units of analysis to demonstrate the robustness of our findings across existing explanations of conflict. Our findings suggest that conflict is more than thrice as likely within dominance vacuums.

A Theory of Dominance Vacuums

Accepting the assumption of hierarchies in international politics does not necessarily imply that they are either stable over time or that they cover all of geopolitical space. Much of the dominance of major powers depends on their capabilities and reach, and the extent to which the capabilities of other major powers and regional powers may intrude on the same geopolitical space. It is plausible, then, that in the international system there are simultaneously spaces where one state dominates and those spaces where states' projected capabilities are contested. Furthermore, as capabilities change, a geopolitical space may change from one of major power dominance to one where such dominance no longer exists.

We propose that in those spaces where no single state dominates, a *dominance vacuum* is formed and in that vacuum there is greater opportunity for conflict between states within that space. Such a vacuum is created when a single powerful state no longer is able to manifest dominant capabilities within in a specific geopolitical space, either because its strength is insufficient to reach into that particular space with overwhelming strength, or its reach is now checked by the reach of other powers within that same geopolitical space. In this sense, the vacuum to which we refer is the absence of dominance by a single state, rather than the absence of all power in the geopolitical space. While power hierarchies dominate substantial parts of international politics, it is in the geographical spaces that lack clearly defined hierarchies that we propose will be the most conflict prone.

Some have argued that one contextual variable that may increase the probability that states will experience conflict is the absence of hierarchy and the order which that hierarchy provides (Keohane 1980; Webb and Krasner 1989; Volgy and Imwalle 2000); otherwise, dominant states use their capabilities to create economic and security architecture resulting in relative peace and stability (Geller and Singer 1998; Gilpin 1988). A narrower interpretation would suggest that within a dominance vacuum, the viability of conflict engagement is increased due to the absence of a single dominant state to deter its use. Whether the driver is complex (the creation of order) or simple (dominant power creating a deterrent effect), applying these principles to the distribution of capabilities across geopolitical spaces suggests conflict is less likely in geographic spaces analytically proximate to dominant states in the system.

In those geographic spaces less proximate to the strongest states in the system, where dominant states cannot fully reach with their capabilities or their projected capabilities are being matched by another projecting strong state, no major power will be able to exercise unilateral influence over order or to provide a clear deterrent effect over states within the vacuum. First, the use of conflict within the space becomes more attractive to the strongest projecting states than in other geographic spaces, especially given the relative ambiguity of conflict outcomes caused by movement towards parity (Fearon 1995). Second, central to this theoretical claim is the assumption within hierarchical theories of international politics that the more preponderant the capabilities of a dominant state, the more peaceful the system (Wohlforth 1994; Volgy and Imwalle 1995), whereas the more salient a challenge to the dominant state, the greater the probability of conflict and war (Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980; Lemke 2002).¹ Whether or not such conditions hold for major powers likely depends on a number of factors irrelevant to our efforts. What is important to us is to move the logic from major power

relationships to geographical spaces, seeking to map out conditions where there is no dominant power and postulating that the resulting vacuum increases the likelihood of conflict for states situated within the vacuum.²

We extend the logic of previous work (e.g. Boulding 1962; Lemke 2002) modifying relative capabilities by geographic space to the system level, by modifying the capabilities of the most powerful states by distance to identify dominance vacuums where the ordering effect of power preponderance is relatively absent.³ As Boulding (1962) first noted in his proposal of the loss of strength gradient, the further the distance from a state's borders, the less effective are a state's capabilities. While a dominant power may exist, its capabilities are not consistently dominant across all geographic space, eventually being matched (or even exceeded) by the power projection of another state in distant locations well beyond its own borders.⁴ The positive heuristic of adapting conceptions of power distributions across geographic space provides insights into the heterogeneous influence of systemic hierarchy on different geographic spaces within the same time period. Thus the adaptation of systemic power distributions can set a highly salient *context* for existing explanations associated with conflicts between states.

Perhaps this is best noted for the case of one of the strongest explanations of conflict, Vasquez's (1995) emphasis on territoriality, providing important insights into both the location of conflict and likely dispute participants. Indeed, within the MID Locations dataset (Braithwaite 2010) used in this project is a preponderance of border related disputes. If our systemic framework is useful in detecting contextual, systemic constraints regarding conflict, then we should be able to shed further light on the dyadic literature that identifies the relationship between territorial issues and the generation of conflict between states. In fact, as illustrated in

Table 1,⁵ those borders that reside within power vacuums appear to be the most volatile spaces in the international system.

[Table 1 About Here]

By focusing on geopolitical spaces characterized by dominance vacuums, we shift the structural lens away from conflicts between great powers and toward conflicts in the international system as a whole. This change in framing is important for two reasons. First, consistently in hierarchical approaches, the interaction of the most powerful states in the system is the highest level, or “pyramid”, of the international system within which all other subsystems are nested (e.g. Lemke 2002; Lake 2006). Following the logic of their description, the interactions of great powers provide the geopolitical context within which the interactions between all other states are nested, as depicted by Figure 1. Taking each large triangle to represent a dominant state projecting capabilities outward from their borders across geographic space, and those capabilities deteriorating by distance, those spaces where the great power is dominant are least likely to experience conflict. Alternatively, a dominance vacuum forms where no dominant state exists over the geographic space in the shaded area, as the two projecting states' capabilities are contested. States within these spaces have a greater opportunity to engage in conflict given the absence of a clear power to provide order and should the dominant powers engage in conflict, it is in these spaces where the conflict is most likely to occur.

[Figure 1 About Here]

Second, structural theories typically are limited to analyzing changes in conflict *over time*, and at points only when changes occur in the distribution of capabilities among major

powers (Organski and Kugler 1980; Houweling and Siccama 1988; Kim 1989; Gochman 1990). However, since we focus not on conflict between major powers, but the interactions between all states within vacuums where dominant powers have lost their preponderance (as illustrated in Figure 1), we provide a means of providing context for interstate conflict onset generally. Therefore, we test the following series of hypotheses, the first outlining the general expectation and the second two addressing issues specific to conflict participants:

Hypothesis 1: Geographic spaces characterized by dominance vacuums, where a clearly dominant state projecting power is absent, are more likely to experience conflict onset.

Hypothesis 2: Geographic spaces characterized by dominance vacuums, where a clearly dominant state projecting power is absent, are more likely to experience conflict between contending dominant major powers.

Hypothesis 3: Geographic spaces characterized by dominance vacuums, where a clearly dominant state projecting power is absent, are more likely to experience conflict between contiguous dyads within the vacuum.

Data and Methods

Measuring Power Projection: In order to identify the existence of dominance vacuums, we first chart the intersection of projected capabilities by the most powerful states. In geopolitical spaces where there is no dominant state, we expect that conflict is more likely to occur than in spaces where a dominant state is present. While the term “dominant power” is often used to describe the state at the pinnacle of the global power hierarchy, we depart from this convention by moderating the systemic hierarchical logic with geography: we generate not a single pyramid of hierarchy for the international system (e.g. Organski 1958, p. 365; Tammen et

al. 2000, p. 8), but many hierarchical pyramids blanketing the globe across geographic spaces, where the structure of power hierarchy for each pyramid is determined by the power projection of states.

We classify a state as a dominant power when it is dominant across at least some portion of geographic space. This includes most major powers, with significant capabilities, but also some regional powers that are so distant from major powers that they dominate within their immediate neighborhoods. For example, Brazil in the 1880s possessed far fewer capabilities than European powers, but had sufficient capabilities given its great distance from major powers to be dominant over its immediate geographic area.⁶ We identify 11 states dominant over some geographic space for a minimum of one year from 1916-2001: the United States, Russia/Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, China, Japan, Germany, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, South Africa, and Australia.⁷

To measure power projection by these states, we employ Bueno de Mesquita's (1981) operationalization of Boulding's (1962) loss of strength gradient, where the power of each state is scaled to any point in geographic space by

$$P_{ij} = \text{Power}^{\log[(\text{miles})/(\text{milesperday})+(10-e)]}$$

where P is the power of some state i at point j , and j is a geographic point some number of miles from state i 's capital. Power is operationalized between 0 and 1 as the state's share of capabilities within the international system from the Correlates of War Composite National Material Capabilities Index (CINC) (Singer et al. 1972; Singer 1987).⁸ The larger the equation in the exponent as a function of distance, the smaller the adjusted power capabilities will be for state i at point j . Miles per day represents the distance the projecting state is capable of

traversing per day, accounting for technology. We follow Bueno de Mesquita's use of 250 miles per day from 1816-1918,⁹ 375 miles per day from 1919-1945, and 500 miles per day from 1946-2001.¹⁰ Using the loss of strength gradient, we calculate reach for all states dominant over at least some geographic space from 1816-2001.

When does a dominance vacuum occur? For us, it occurs when the reach of a dominant state is offset by the power projection of one or more powers.¹¹ We operationalize whether a vacuum is present based on the extent to which the most powerful projecting state's capabilities are offset by the second most powerful projecting state, measured by taking the inverse ratio of the two states' projected capabilities, whereby a "1" indicates a space where the top two projecting states are perfectly offset, and a "0" is a space where the projecting dominant states is completely uncontested. While others (e.g. Lemke 2002) have used thresholds to determine the presence of a vacuum, such thresholds are somewhat arbitrary; we retain greater information provided by the continuous variable.¹² We do assume that the closer the projected relative capabilities between two major powers, the greater uncertainty surrounding international hierarchy over that space, and thereby the greater probability for conflict. For visual simplicity in the maps shown below, a power vacuum is depicted if the top two projecting states' capabilities are within 10 percent.

Mapping Dominance Vacuums

For descriptive purposes, we have created a pair of maps representing snapshots from salient, varying historical time periods in order to highlight our claim that conflicts are more likely in geopolitical areas characterized by dominance vacuums: World War I and the most contentious period during the Cold War.¹³ The grey shaded areas within each map represent the vacuums where the two most powerful states' projected capabilities are within 10%. The black

dots represent the center point of MID locations within the year as coded by the MID Locations Data (Braithwaite 2010).

These maps were chosen in order to illustrate vacuums during historical periods of high conflict and transition in the international system. We anticipate and observe a number of dissenting cases that fall outside our expectations, since dominance vacuums increase dramatically the opportunity for conflict by increasing contextual uncertainty, but they do not constitute a necessary condition for them. However, the general distribution of MIDs suggests a strong relationship between dominance vacuums and the conflict behaviors of all states in the system.

Figure 2 illustrates power vacuums at the start of World War I. The power vacuums and MID locations in this first graphic illustrate the expectations of *Hypothesis 2* that projecting dominant states will fight within those geographic spaces where their projected strength is at parity. The dark shaded area to the west represents a vacuum formed by the contested projected capabilities, as determined by the loss of strength gradient, of three strong powers: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany.¹⁴ Similarly, the grey vacuum on the East side of the map is formed by the contested projected capabilities between Germany and the Russian Empire. Within the vacuums are the central points of nine of the fourteen European MID's. Anecdotally, so also are many of the bloodiest battles of the First World War: Verdun, the Somme, the Marne, and Ypres. Additionally, the great trenches of the war, marked by the black dashes in France and Eastern Europe, cross the dominance vacuums.¹⁵ The two white spaces in the middle of the map represent the geographic spaces of German and British dominance.¹⁶ The case of World War I illustrates that apart from the salience of policy preferences and alliance behaviors for instigating

conflicts, the geographic spaces where the conflict has the opportunity to manifest lies squarely within dominance vacuums.

[Figure 2 About Here]

In Figure 3, we present a graphic illustration of dominance vacuums during the Cold War formed by the projected capabilities of the United States and Soviet Union in 1960. These vacuums and the heated conflicts they subsume are strongly reminiscent of the Cold War shatterbelts identified by Kelly (1986).¹⁷ We accurately predict twenty-five of thirty MIDs, with the year 1960 illustrating the relationships to geographic space proposed by *Hypothesis 1*. Particularly interesting among the MIDs is the cluster representing the Vietnam War, one of the most violent conflicts during the period resulting in almost twenty years of continued fighting. While direct conflict between the United States or Soviet Union was relatively unlikely given the preponderance of power each possessed around its own border, they engaged in a series of proxy conflicts inside dominance vacuums. The power projection of the two super powers intersects exactly through the middle of Vietnam, closely mirroring the eventual dividing line between North and South maintained until North Vietnamese victory in 1975.

[Figure 3 About Here]

While the image of World War I predominantly depicts a struggle involving the dominant powers expected by *Hypothesis 2*, dominant powers being parties to the conflict is not an inherent theoretical expectation. The causal mechanism to our theory is the perceived absence of a deterring presence by a clear dominant state, not conflict as a byproduct of great power competition. We should therefore expect both MIDs involving interfering/competing dominant states, as in the case of Vietnam, and MIDs between weak states within dominance vacuums.

The contextual argument and the predictions we present are probabilistic and we anticipate that we cannot predict that all MIDs will fall within dominance vacuums. For instance, we do not account for rare cases where policy makers will take enormous risks (consistent with prospect theory) in the face of overwhelming deterrent capabilities, or grossly misperceived their geopolitical contexts. We recognize that not “all things are equal” and some of these conditions can interfere the relationships we are projecting; therefore we predict that the overwhelming number of MIDs will be located in dominance vacuums, but anticipate some exceptions to the prediction. In fact there are several notable MIDs in the figures that fall outside of our predictions, including the Cuban Missile Crisis (which is not an insignificant conflict).¹⁸ Yet, even this case, squarely within a geopolitical space of American dominance, ended with Soviet policymakers abandoning their designs and the final agreement ceded withdrawal of American missiles from Turkish space dominated by the Soviet Union. Although contrary to our prediction, the conflict’s resolution is broadly consistent with our theoretical perspective.

We test our hypothesis using two units of analysis. Models 1 and 2 measure vacuums as the power projection from dominant states to the center point of ten degree longitude by ten degree latitude geographic squares. This operationalization is conceptually consistent with Organski’s (1958) description of the international system as a hierarchical pyramid. We are adapting this construct to space by measuring and identifying the presence and structure of many pyramids unique to each geopolitical unit. Model 3 tests the dyadic propositions of the paper, measuring the power projection to the center point of a border between two contiguous states controlling for existing dyadic explanations of conflict onset. In each model, the primary independent variable is the presence of a dominance vacuum, coded as the inverse ratio of capabilities between the top two projecting states. Ranging from 0-1, if a dominance vacuum is completely present and the two

states projected capabilities are equal, the variable will take the value 1. The measurement specifics and additional variables for each model are outlined below.

Testing Power Projection and Conflict

Model 1: Geographic Spaces. A careful coding of distance between dominant powers and geographic spaces provides a unique means of observing both power projection and MID locations. Each space represents a distinct unit, to which we calculate the power projection of each dominant power according to the loss of strength gradient from the capital of the state to the space's midpoint, resulting in 648 observations annually from 1816-2001. We use ten degree by ten degree spaces as a unit of geographic space distinct from state borders or topography and sufficiently large to prevent logistical or computational difficulties.¹⁹ The dependent variable is the presence of a MID within any portion of the geographic space, as determined by the MID locations dataset (Braithwaite 2010). We code each geographic space as 1 if it includes a border, and zero otherwise. In doing so, we hope to demonstrate that a conflict occurring at a particular border is a function of the involved states' geopolitical situation within a dominance vacuum. Given that most MIDs occur over territorial issues between states (Vasquez 1995, 2001), we expect to find that while the presence of a border in a geographic space does increase the probability of MID onset, the presence of that border within a vacuum only further bolsters the possibility, as illustrated in Table 1. Finally, we include clustered standard errors by geographic space.

Model 2: Geographic Spaces and Joint Major Power Conflicts. In Model 2, we repeat the same analysis as Model 1 but restrict the dependent variable to the presence of a MID within any portion of the geographic space involving a Major Power on both sides of the MID at

the MID's onset. We restrict ourselves to Major Powers to address *Hypothesis 2*, that the uncertainty surrounding conflict outcomes in a geographic space where projecting dominant powers capabilities creates a dominance vacuum increases opportunity for conflict between major powers within that space.²⁰

Model 3: Contiguous Dyads. We move away from the unit of analysis in Models 1 and 2, by measuring the presence or absence of dominance to the border of contiguous dyads or the midpoint between states separated by 400 miles or less of water. Using this alternative measurement strategy, we test *Hypothesis 3*, that contiguous states within dominance vacuums are more likely to experience conflict. Given our focus on interstate conflict, it is necessary to test the effect of vacuums within a baseline model controlling for the two most prevalent measures used in the conflict literature: relative capabilities (Singer et al. 1972) and joint regime type (Marshall et al. 2011). Relative capabilities are measured as the ratio of the two states in the dyad's Correlates of War National Material Capabilities. To determine the degree of democracy within a dyad, we follow the weakest-link method often used in conflict research with each observation coded as the lowest value of the Polity IV democracy-autocracy composite (Dixon 1994). Dominance vacuums are operationalized by calculating the power projection of each dominant power from the capital of the dominant power to the mid-point of the border in the dyad. Absent, however, from this pool of contiguous dyads are dyads involving non-contiguous major powers, ones that are often included in conceptualizations of political relevance (Bremer 1992; Quackenbush 2006; Corbetta et al. 2012).²¹ Doing so within this model is impossible, as testing requires the identification of some salient geographic point for each dyad to which we are able to measure power projection. While we identify the mid-point of the border as a suitable point for contiguous dyads, there is no equivalently clear geographic point to measure power

projection between two non-contiguous major powers or a non-contiguous major power/non-major power dyad, though of course the non-contiguous behaviors of major powers are captured in Model 2. The dependent variable employed in Model 3 is the presence of a conflict onset within the dyad in a given year from the Militarized Interstate Dispute data (Ghosn et al. 2004), resulting in observations for 32,345 contiguous dyads from 1816-2001. Finally, we include clustered standard errors by dyad.

Findings for each of the three models are listed in Table 2. Each model offers results that appear to support our theory of dominance vacuums and conflict onset. Regardless of the unit of analysis or controls present in the testing of our hypothesis, the influence of vacuums on MID onset is substantively and statistically significant.²² Model 1, using ten degree by ten degree geographic spaces as the unit of analysis, demonstrates that geographic spaces in a space of complete dominance area 3.6 times more likely to experience a MID than those in a space where a single state's projected capabilities are unchallenged. The presence of a border within the geographic space is also statistically significant and increase the odds of MID onset by 9.2 times, underscoring the significant number of MIDs that are territorial disputes and demonstrating the particular potential for MID onset within dominance vacuums that contain borders

[Table 2 About Here]

Figure 4 illustrates the predicted probabilities of MID onset for these geographic spaces depending upon whether they include interstate borders and the strength of the dominance vacuum.²³ When the space includes a border, the effect of a vacuum is even more dramatic, with the predicted probability of conflict onset in a dominance vacuum containing a border at 25%, and the degree of dominance vacuum present increasing the probability of conflict across the range of observations by 18%.

[Figure 4 About Here]

Model 2 repeats the analysis but restricts the dependent variable to joint major power MID onset within a geographic space, as a test of hypothesis 2. Results confirm our expectations, with geographic spaces in a complete dominance vacuum 16.9 times more likely to experience joint major power conflicts than geographic spaces where a single state's projected capabilities dominate. Figure 5 illustrates the predicted probability of Joint Major Power MID onset for geographic spaces, with the probability rising rapidly as relative projected parity increases between the top two projecting dominant states, and at a greater rate if the space includes a border. In the absence of a dominance vacuum, joint major power conflict is almost entirely absent.

[Figure 5 About Here]

The effect of dominance vacuums on conflict is confirmed by the dyadic test in Model 3, testing Hypothesis 3 expectations regarding all contiguous dyads. Even when controlling for joint democracy, perhaps the most consistently powerful indicator of conflict behavior in the literature (Levy 1989), we find a strong substantive impact, with the existence of a dominance vacuum in the geopolitical space increasing the probability of experiencing a MID within a dyad by 18%, as illustrated in Figure 6.

[Figure 6 About Here]

Dominance Vacuums and Politics

On the chessboard of international politics the dynamics of regions and the security of states are subject to the ordering influence by dominant powers. However, their influence is not constant across geographic space, as their relative capabilities deteriorate across distance.

Within dominance vacuums, where no clear leader exists to structure international politics, the formation of “shatterbelts” is likely as other states are less restrained by dominant powers. As demonstrated by our findings and descriptive analysis, these vacuums present the most likely contexts of geopolitical spaces for conflict onset in the international system. We may expect, for instance, the clustering of conflicts in the Middle East and Africa to continue until a shift in the power hierarchy within these geographic spaces terminates the vacuum. By contrast, the implications for states moving out of vacuums may be observed in the rapid evolution of the pre-existing European Economic Community into the more sophisticated and cooperative institutional structures of the European Union with the Maastricht Treaty following the end of the Cold War.

While we provide an important component to explaining the opportunity for states to engage in conflict given the contextual salience of the systemic environment, willingness to engage in conflict remains a product of dyadic and domestic level indicators, ranging across historical, cultural, national, and ideological grievances, territory, and economic interests. Yet, our theory also provides a compelling case in those instances where these willingness measures are present, but conflict does not occur, including many ongoing territorial disputes such as Japan and Russia’s continued disagreement over the Kuril Islands, Guatemala’s territorial claims on Belize, or British and Spanish disagreement over Gibraltar.

The framework for identifying probable conflict locations in this effort has the potential for numerous other applications. First, further exploration of the regional dynamics identified by Lemke (2002) is warranted. We examined only the projected capabilities of the most powerful states in a geographic space. Applying our analysis to regional subsystems nested within the dominant power reach used here to define vacuums may have important implications

for regional politics, as well as the prospects for regional powers such as Brazil and India to achieve future major power status as they attempt to reconcile regional concerns and focus globally (Volgy et al. 2014). Consistent with the literature on regional politics over the past century, it is likely that the intersection of dominant power capabilities with regional power dynamics is an additional component influencing regional stability (e.g. Buzan and Waever 2003; Katzenstein 2005). In fact, an analysis of regions based in part on the extent to which those geopolitical spaces vary according to the extent of the existence of dominance vacuums may yield fruitful inter-regional comparisons regarding conflict processes.

Second, our theory is based upon the stability of a clear hierarchy in international politics and the instability resulting when hierarchical dominance is degraded over geopolitical spaces. Logically, the byproducts of this instability should not simply be restricted to MIDs, but also other forms of political violence. For example, the decline of piracy in the South China Sea coincides with the rise of Chinese dominance in the geographic space in the early 1990s (Prins and Daxecker 2011) and domestic conflicts in Central and Eastern Africa likely reside within very consistent power vacuums. The absence of a clearly defined hierarchy over a geographic space may increase the probability of civil war, separatist movements, terrorism, and perhaps even the ending of enduring rivalries. Research relating such vacuums to the locations of extra- and intra- state violence is a logical next step toward a better understanding of peace and conflict in the international system.

¹ Typically research on power preponderance has focused analysis at the global level, providing explanations of economic integration, cooperation, and architecture (Kindleberger 1973; Lake 1993; Eichengreen 1996). Dominant within this perspective are explanations of conflict at points of systemic transition between major powers in the context of a dissatisfied challenger with sufficient relative capabilities to challenge the dominant state (Organski and Kugler 1984), and this logic has been expanded to include regional and domestic subsystems (Benson and Kugler 1998; Lemke and Werner 1996; Lemke 2002; Tammen et al. 2000; Danilovic and Clare 2007). Unlike power transition, we are not interested in the effect of satisfaction on the conflict willingness of specific actors, but instead

the opportunity for conflict to occur within specific geographic spaces given the contextual distribution of capabilities.

² Note again that unlike power transition theory we are not focused on rising, dissatisfied challengers but simply the hierarchical contextual and geopolitical salience of where conflicts are most probable.

³ While Lemke (2002) shifts the analytical focus from interactions between dominant powers to the interactions of “middle” and “small” powers in Organski’s pyramid of power politics (1958, p. 365), we shift the analytical lens simultaneously toward both all states and dominant hierarchical powers, in order to better understand the behavior of states at all levels of the international system given the projection of capabilities between dominant powers across geographic space.

⁴ The examples are many, such as American dominance in North America in the 19th century, the rapid increase in the sphere of German dominance across the European continent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, or the rise of China in East Asia in the post-Cold War period. Some examples of power projection are illustrated in Figures 2 and 2.

⁵ We test this exact implication, alongside other competing dominant dyadic indicators, in Model 3 below. Note that we do not claim that territorial conflicts are uniquely influence by vacuums, but instead provide borders as an additional geographic contextual component to conflict location.

⁶ The remoteness of spaces like South America is an important consideration when studying international power hierarchy and has been the topic of existing work applying power transition to the regional context (Lemke 1995, 2002, 2011).

⁷ These states are identified as dominant over at least some geographic space, given the power projection of all states, in at least one year. However, the regional powers included in this list are only relevant for a small handful of years prior to 1945 when they are subsumed by the improved technological ability of global major powers to project their capabilities: Argentina (1860-1905), Australia (1927-1940), Brazil (1879-1889), Peru (1866-1881), and South Africa (1931-1937). Also note the absence of some major powers proximate to other major powers with significantly greater capabilities: France, Italy, and Austria-Hungary. Their absence is not to imply their irrelevance to conflict within zones of parity, as in both World Wars dominance vacuums were located directly on these states. Their capabilities are, however, subsumed by the power projection of other proximate major powers, and therefore not dominant over any portion of geographic space.

⁸ We use the Correlates of War CINC scores as the dominant indicator of capabilities in conflict research available for the most extensive time period. Alternatives such as GDP are occasionally used, particularly in power transition work (Kugler and Domkke 1995). We have explored using GDP for available years and results appear to be consistent with our findings.

⁹ The 250 miles per day during the 19th century is likely grossly optimistic given observed transit realities. Though we retain Bueno de Mesquita’s convention of 250 miles in our tests, we have repeated all models at 170 and 120 miles per day prior to 1918, and our results are consistent with those provided in this paper. Furthermore, we have run all tests on data only 1918 and following, and results again are consistent.

¹⁰ Lemke (2002) argues that the loss of strength gradient is overly simplistic by not accounting for the type of terrain across which power is being projected. He therefore adapts the loss of strength gradient to account for types of terrain being traversed in conjunction with available technology to calculate a unique “miles per day” scaling. While his careful attentiveness to terrain increases the validity of the loss of strength gradient in identifying regional hierarchies, doing so at the global scale for this project presents a daunting logistical challenge. First, it would be necessary to calculate gradients for each of the potential dominant powers, whose more expansive capabilities require the determination of terrain for a much larger geographic space than Lemke’s identification of multiple hierarchies at the regional level. Second, Lemke determined the reach for smaller states from one to another’s capital within a single region, whereas the underlying theory of this paper requires the calculation of each major power’s loss of strength gradient across geographic spaces globally. Given the time and computational costs, we limit our initial exploration of our theory to the three models provided.

¹¹ Lemke (2002) includes a 50% threshold in addition to relative parity in order to determine whether a regional hierarchy is contested. Admittedly arbitrary, this threshold is unnecessary at the global scale given the great size of most dominant states capabilities and their general ability to project globally. However, we also tested all models coding power vacuums as both spaces where parity between dominant states exist and where there was no state projecting 50% of its raw capabilities. Findings were both statistically and substantively nearly identical and are available in the Online Appendix.

¹² Following Lemke’s operationalization of parity in the power projection of regional actors, we initially coded power vacuums as all spaces where the top two projecting states’ capabilities were within 20%. While results were

substantively and statistically significant, we proceeded to also test the alternative thresholds of 10%, 5%, and 1% as well as a continuous variable of the two states capabilities ratio that ignored thresholds shown in Models 1-3. All tests produced significant results and are available in the Online Appendix.

¹³ Future research should set about mapping power vacuums over time and analyzing the effect on a geographic space of shifting in or out of power vacuum status.

¹⁴ Note, the greater the state's capabilities, the less rapidly those capabilities deteriorate across space, which is why Germany is at parity with Britain in the low countries and France, then the British are dominant over Britain, but the two are at parity once again in the North Atlantic.

¹⁵ Much of southwestern Russia where the trenches extend beyond the vacuum was ceded in the Treaty of Brest-Litvosk.

¹⁶ It should not be surprising that Austria-Hungary, being subsumed by German capability projection, was a member of the Triple Alliance while the French were closely aligned with the United Kingdom. This is of course not to imply that France or the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not of primary importance to the war's onset or that historical grievances and domestic circumstances are irrelevant or hostage to power projection. Vacuums merely increase the probability of conflict within the geographic space by the absence of a dominant state, increasing the opportunity for historical grievances and policy preferences to manifest themselves in conflictual policy choices.

¹⁷ We differ from Kelly by not taking first the region and then determining whether only the two super powers choose to compete, but instead determining where states have the opportunity to compete, and then identifying locations of MID onset.

¹⁸ The MID shown in the map for 1960 is the sinking of *Le Coubre* and the U.S. mobilization of forces in preparation for the Bay of Pigs.

¹⁹ This method of dividing geographic space into gridded units is frequently employed in studies of civil war (e.g. Buhaug and Gates 2002, Buhaug and Rod 2006), often using much smaller units than ten degree squares. Tolefsen et al. (2012) have provided much smaller grid cells with global coverage that could be employed. However, implementation is typically undertaken at a country or regional level, resulting in much smaller datasets. Doing so at the global level is exponentially more difficult for not only coding power projection for major powers throughout the past two hundred years, but also computationally demanding given the millions of observation that would result from smaller units of such an extensive length of time, requiring researchers to employ sampling. Given the fairly wide range across which many international conflicts occur (see the MID Locations data conflict area variable for examples, such as "South China Sea" or "Border with Russia"), geographic spaces of smaller size would unlikely provide meaningfully different results and would serve only to increase the number of observations. Furthermore, given the global reach of the dominant states included in this analysis, and the relatively slow pace at which their power degrade by the loss of strength gradient employed, more nuanced means of measurement would not dramatically influence our results.

²⁰ As a robustness check, we also tested the population of all MIDs not containing joint major power dyads. Results were statistically and substantively similar to the results from Model 1.

²¹ Dyads involving major powers are, however, included where contiguous by territory or up to 400 miles of water, such as U.S.-Cuba, U.S.-Russia, Russia-China, or Britain-Germany.

²² In addition to the presented results we also ran additional models using coarsened exact matching on the data from Models 1 & 3 to correct for imbalances present in relative capabilities and capabilities, respectively, using the presence of a vacuum as the treatment variable. Results from the matching models are of similar substantive and statistical significance to those reported here. As an alternative conceptualization to dyads or geographic spaces conducted a country-year model permitting a different set of controls, further demonstrating the robustness of our findings: capabilities (Singer et al. 1972), major power status (Correlates of War Project 2008), and regime type (Marshall et al. 2011). Using states allows a test to determine if dominance vacuums in geopolitical spaces, such as in Europe for much of the twentieth century, maintain the relevance found in Models 1 and 3, as well as if state capabilities influence the contextual effect of residing within a vacuum. Furthermore, we are able to control for the possibility of some monadic influence of regime type they may correspond with clustering and state dominance, such as the Long Cycle Theory expectation of democratic peacefulness given American dominance (Rasler and Thompson 1994) or monadic democratic peace research (Quackenbush and Rudy 2009).

²³ Confidence intervals for all figures are not shown given their extremely small size making them visually indistinguishable from the predicted probabilities values.

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Tables

Table 1: Percentage of Geographic Spaces that Include MID Onset by Borders and Dominance Vacuums, 1816-2001.²⁴

	<i>No Border</i>	<i>Border</i>
<i>Dominance</i>	2%	16%
<i>Vacuum</i>	5%	25%
<i>All Spaces</i>	2%	17%

Table 2: Logistic Regression Results for Dominance Vacuum and MID Onset.

	<i>Model 1 Geographic Spaces</i>	<i>Model 2 Joint Major Power Conf.</i>	<i>Model 3 Contiguous Dyads</i>
Vacuum	1.29** (.16)	2.82** (.15)	.44** (.16)
Borders	2.22** (.02)	1.46** (.12)	
Years in Vacuum	.02 (.02)	.01 (.01)	-.05 (.05)
Relative Capabilities			-.68** (.24)
Joint Democracy			-.04** (.01)
<i>Chi</i> ²	468.27	613.18	23.54
N	120,528	120,528	31,778

*Coefficient (S.E.) **Significant at .99

²⁴ The likelihood ratio chi squared test for the relationship of MID onset with borders and power vacuums is 4,411.38, significant at .99. The relationship is tested in the logistic regression results in Model 1 shown in Table 2, including an additional control for years in a power vacuum and clustered standard errors.

Figures

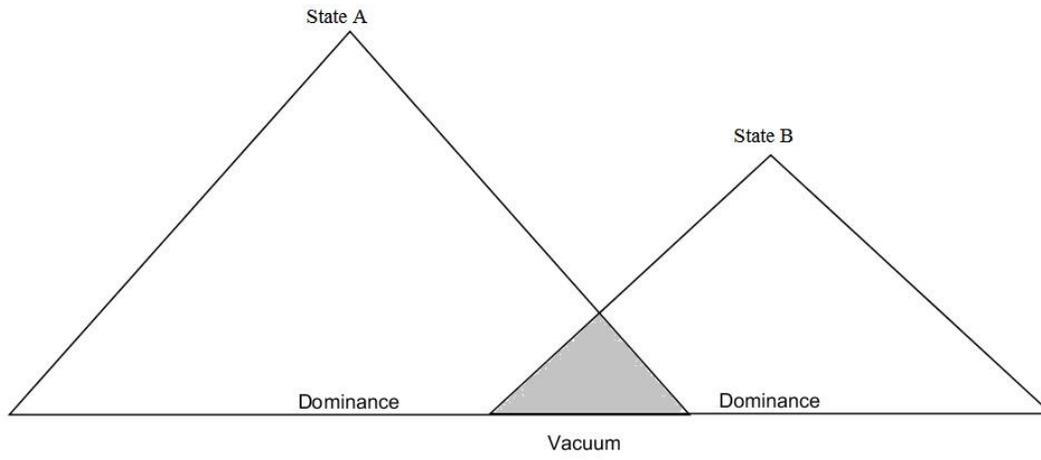


Figure 1: Power Projection and Dominance Vacuums.

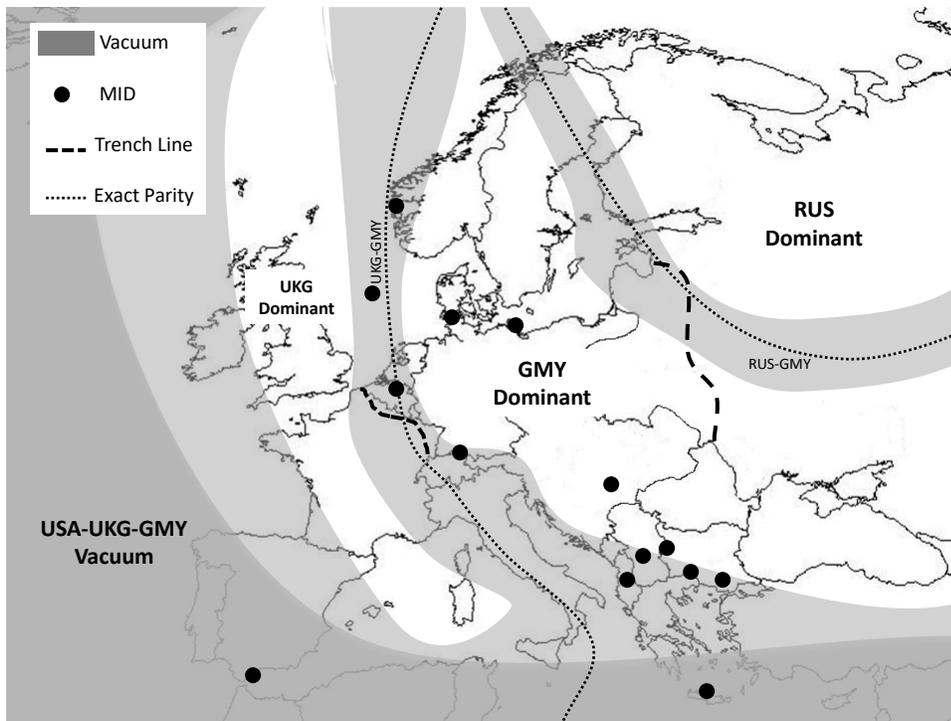


Figure 2: Power Vacuums and MIDs in Europe, 1914-1915.

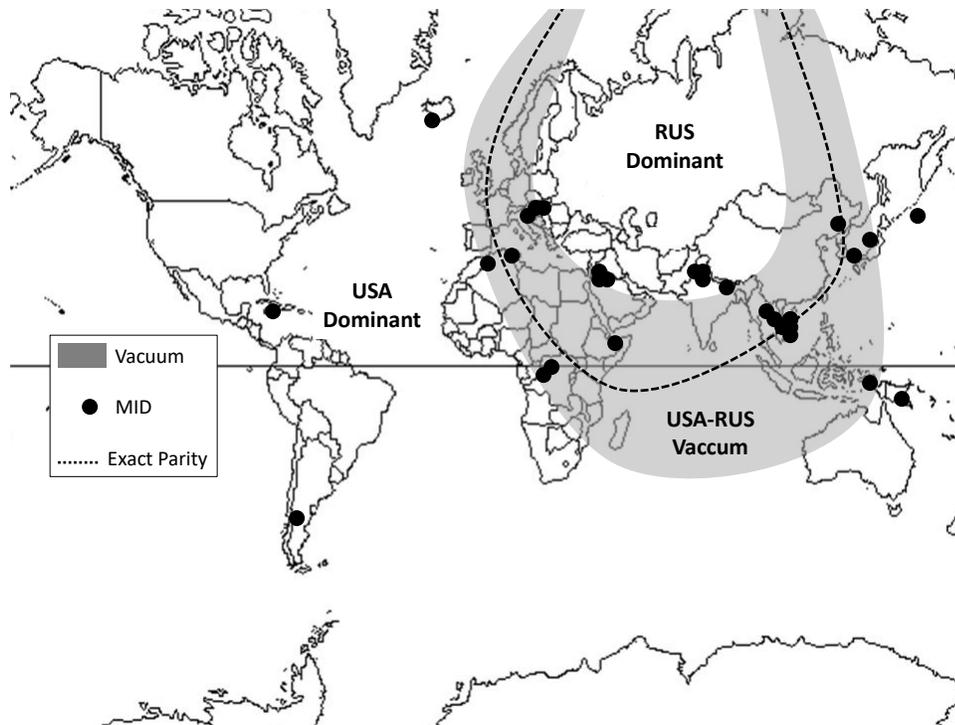


Figure 3: Power Vacuum and MIDs, 1960.

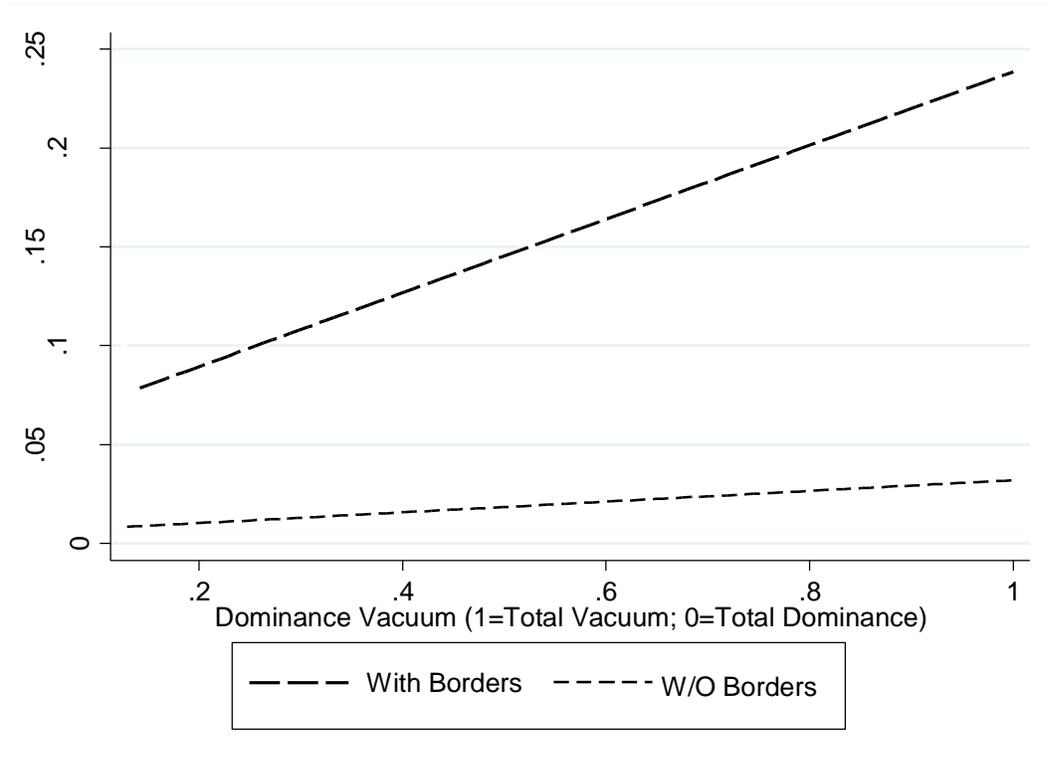


Figure 4: Predicted Probability of MID Onset for Geographic Spaces.

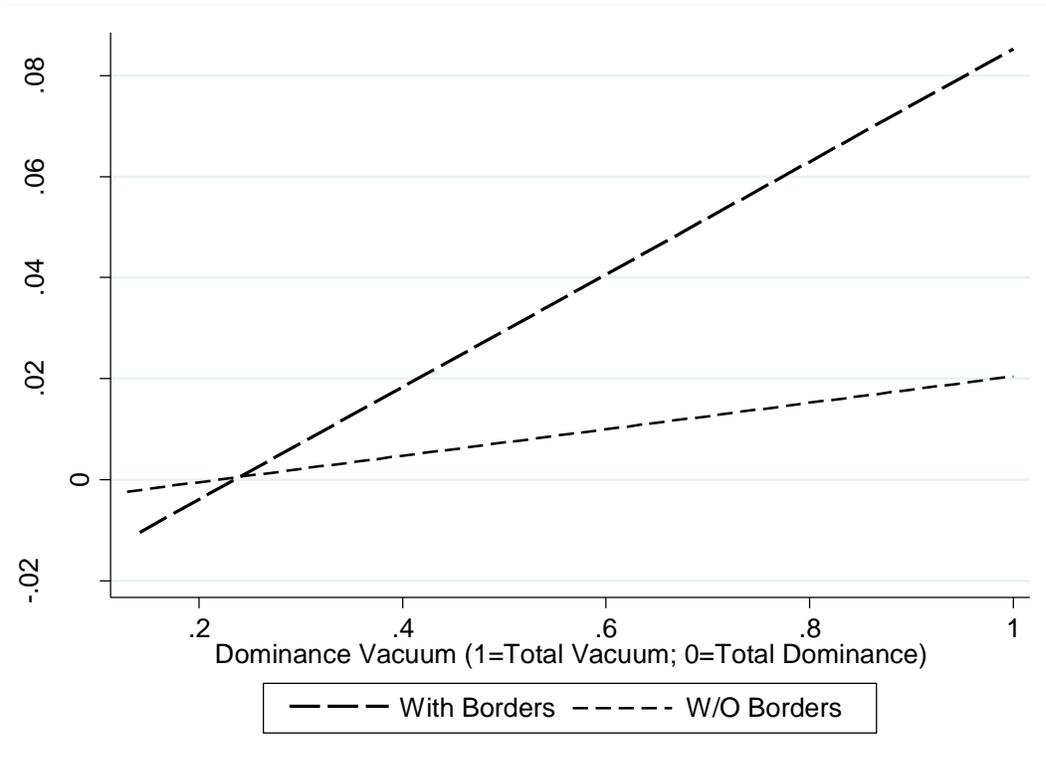


Figure 5: Predicted Probability of Joint Major Power MID Onset in Geographic Spaces.

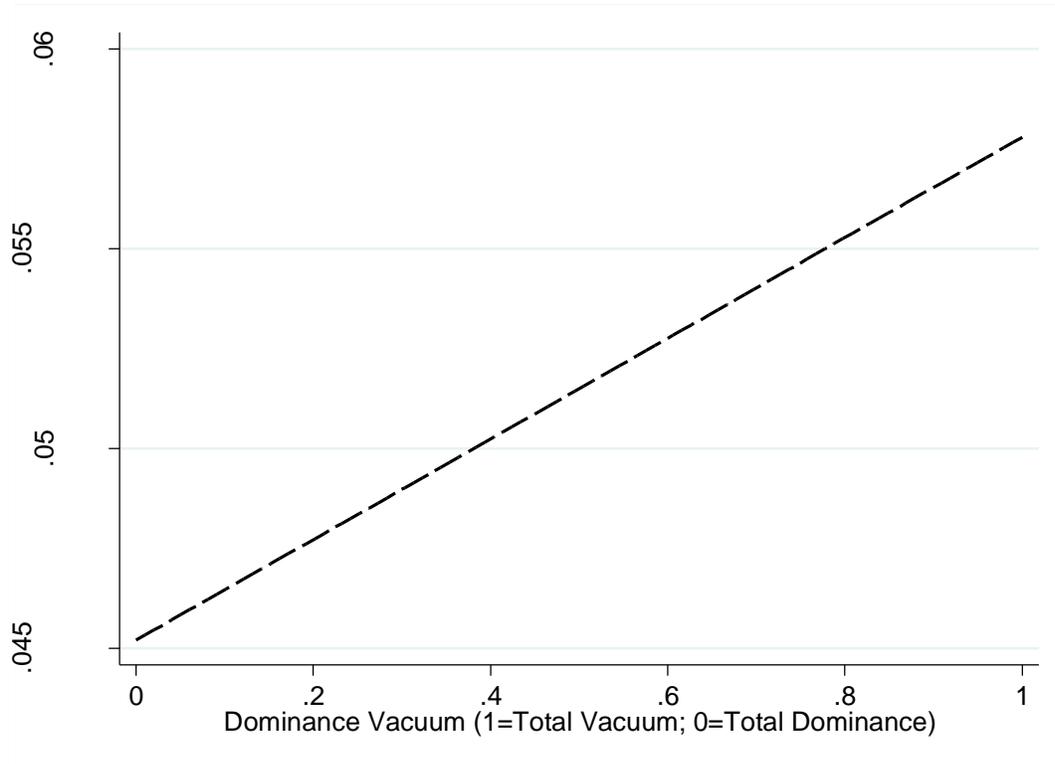


Figure 6: Predicted Probability of Contiguous Dyad MID Onset.