

Is the Fait Accompli the Primary Challenge for Deterrence in the 21st Century?

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December 12th, 2018

Why the Fait Accompli Matters

Nuclear powers have fought each other twice:

China vs. USSR, 1969,
Zhenbao/Damansky Island



Source: CNA

Pakistan vs. India, 1999
Kargil (Kashmir)



Source: India Today

Russia Annexes Crimea (March 2014)



Source: BBC/AFP

How Challengers Get What They Want

Suppose a criminal armed with a gun encounters a wealthy man holding his wallet. The criminal can:

1.

2.

3.



How Challengers Get What They Want

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1. **Brute Force** **Shoot the man. Take the wallet.**
2. **Coercion** **Demand the wallet. Threaten to shoot. Receive the wallet.**
- 3.

How Challengers Get What They Want

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- 1. Brute Force** **Shoot the man. Take the wallet.**
- 2. Coercion** **Demand the wallet. Threaten to shoot. Receive the wallet.**
- 3. Fait Accompli** **Grab the wallet. Bet that the victim will not attack to recover it.**

How Challengers Get What They Want

In 2014, Russia decided to acquire the Crimean Peninsula. Russia could:

- 1. Brute Force** **Defeat Ukrainian Army. Dictate terms.**
- 2. Coercion** **Demand Crimea. Threaten to attack.
Receive Crimea.**
- 3. Fait Accompli** **Take Crimea. Bet that Ukraine (and
NATO) do not attack to recover it.**

How Challengers Get What They Want

Suppose a state wants control of territory held by its neighbor. It can use:

1. **Brute Force** **Kuwait 1990**
2. **Coercion** **Sudetenland 1938**
3. **Fait Accompli** **Crimea 2014**

The Fait Accompli

Definition: Imposing a limited gain without permission in the hope that the adversary will relent rather than escalate in response.

- ▶ Intent is to avoid war, not win it (unlike brute force)
 - ▶ Adversary is not disabled or destroyed
 - ▶ Calculated risk is central
 - ▶ Only viable when aims are limited
- ▶ Gains are taken, not received as concessions (unlike coercion)
- ▶ Credibility is not necessary to make a gain (unlike coercion)
 - ▶ But credibility is useful for keeping control afterward
- ▶ Often exploits the element of surprise

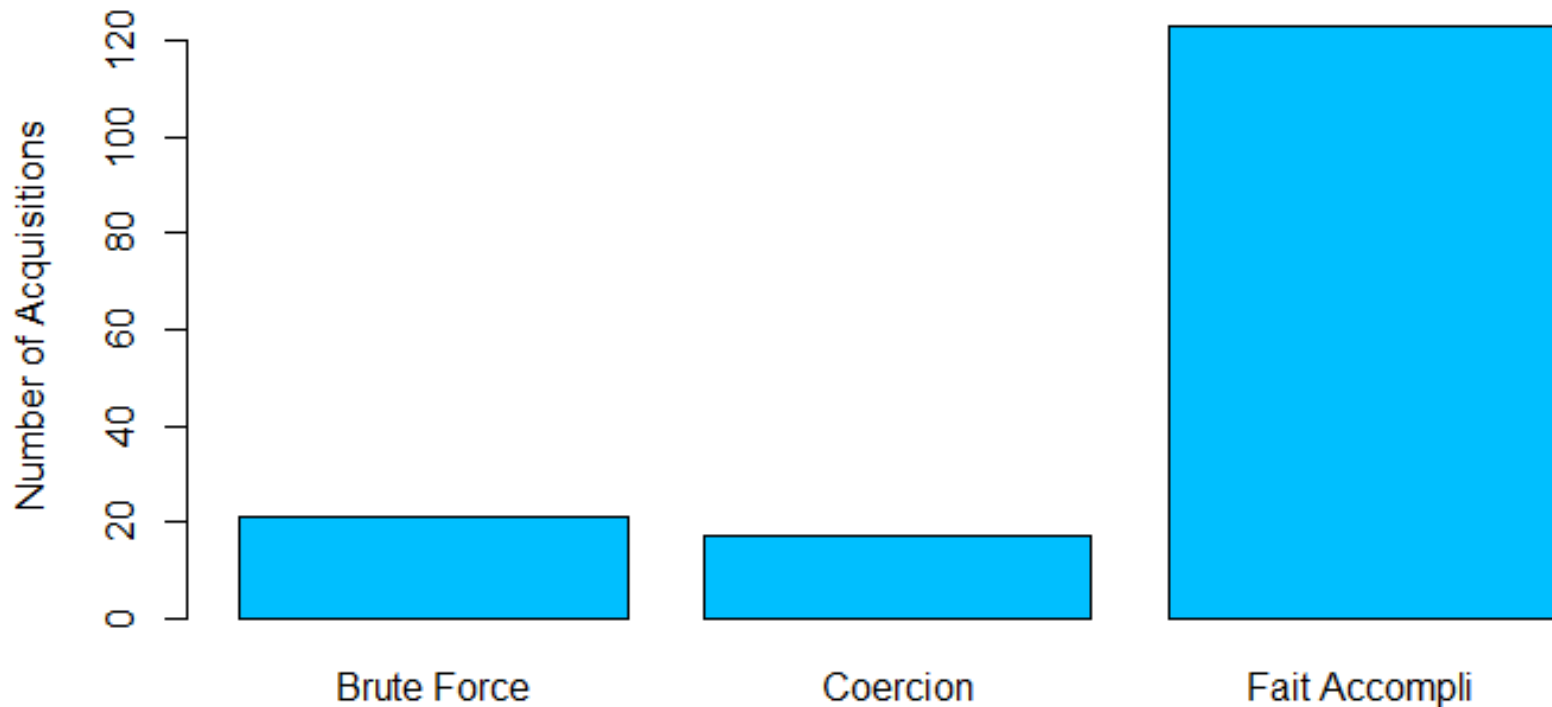
How Common is the Fait Accompli?

Analyzing how challengers made territorial gains (1918-2017) provides a starting point.

1. Brute Force Attempts to conquer entire states
2. Coercion Coerced territorial cessions
3. Fait Accompli Land grabs (Attempts to conquer small parts of states)

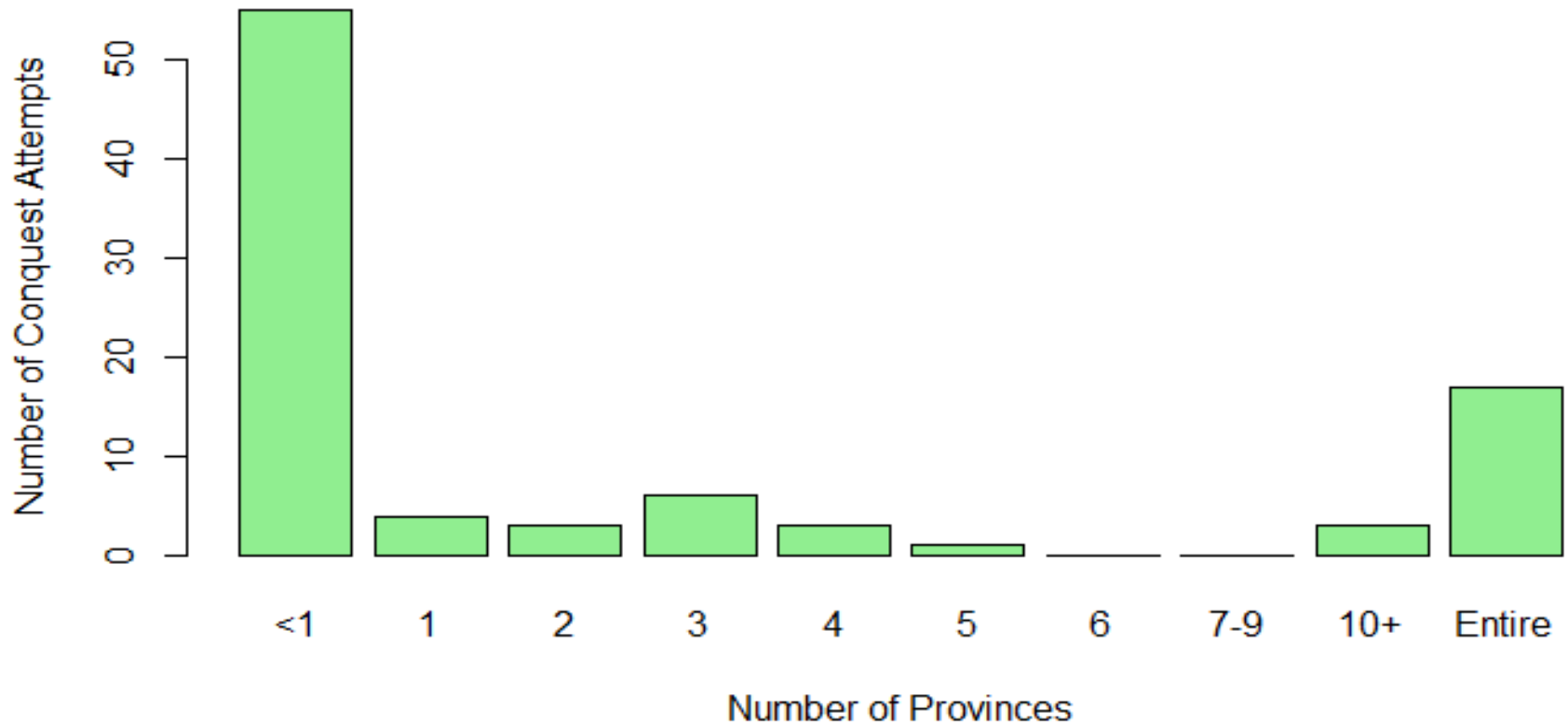
How Challengers Get What They Want

How States Made Territorial Gains, 1918-2017



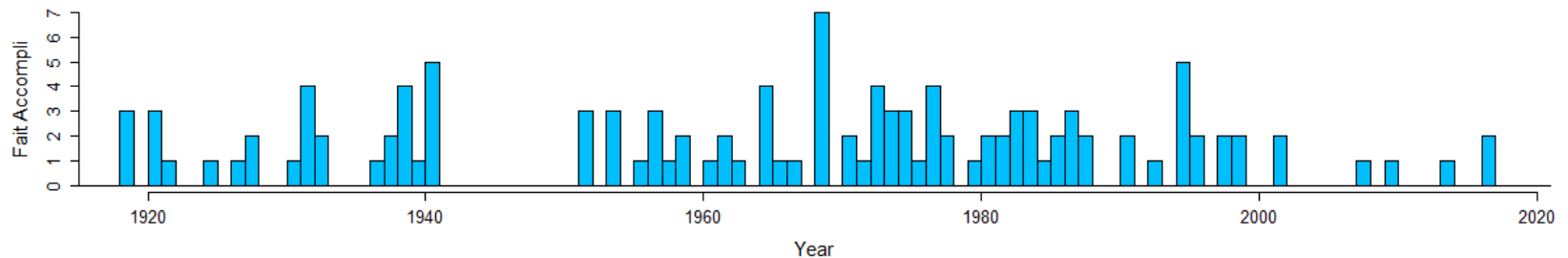
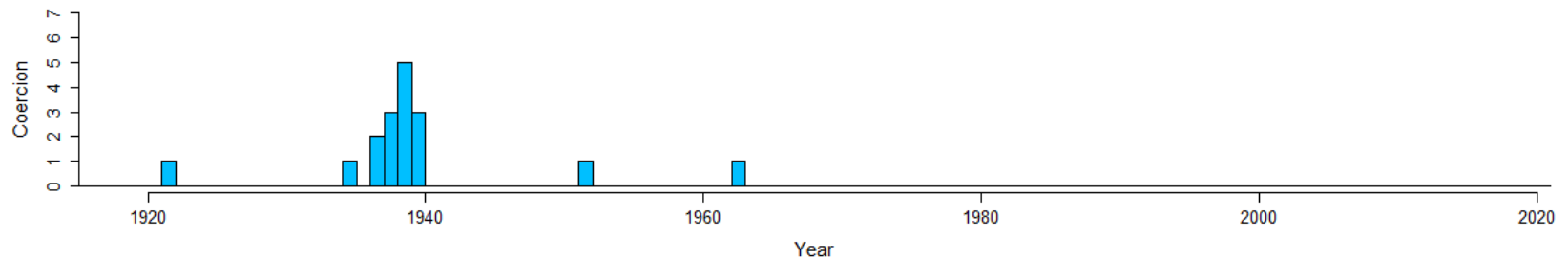
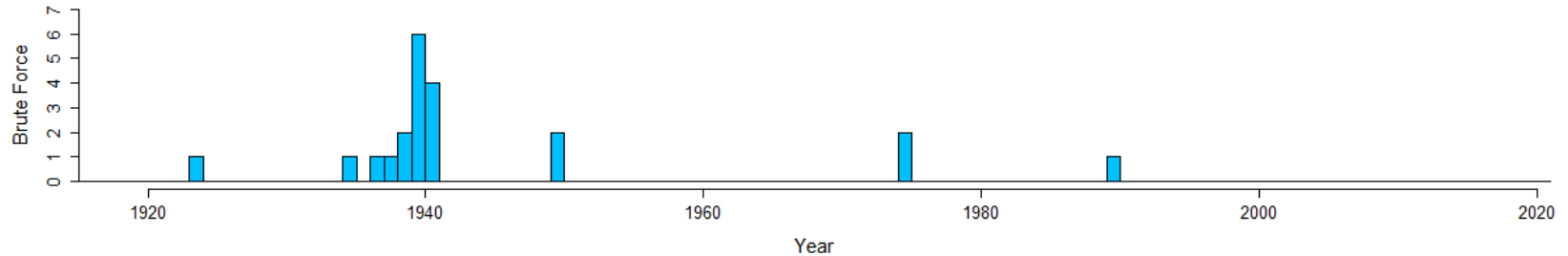
The Fait Accompli vs. Brute Force

The Size of Seized Territories, 1918-2017

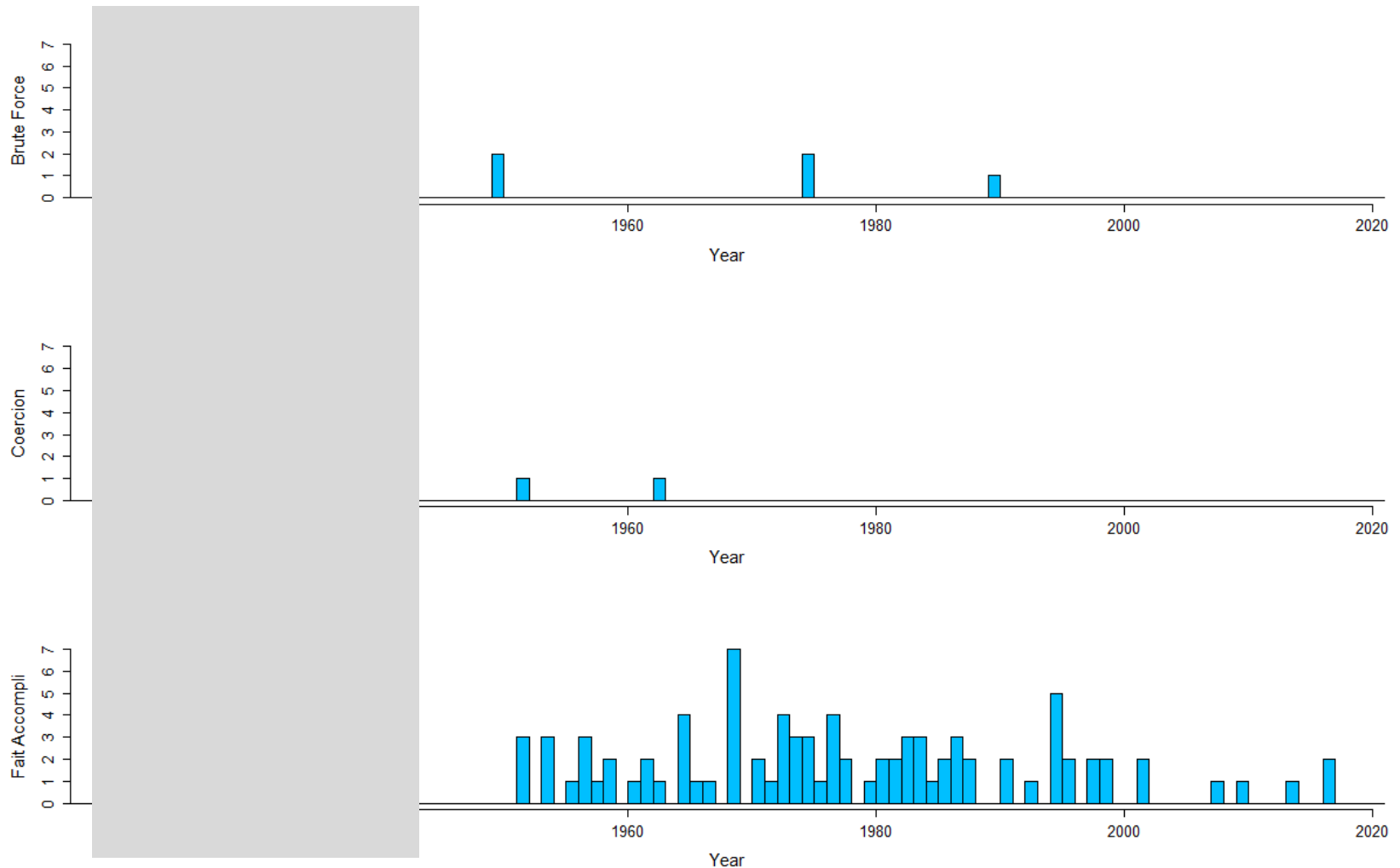


Not Shown: Overseas Colonies

How States Acquired Territory

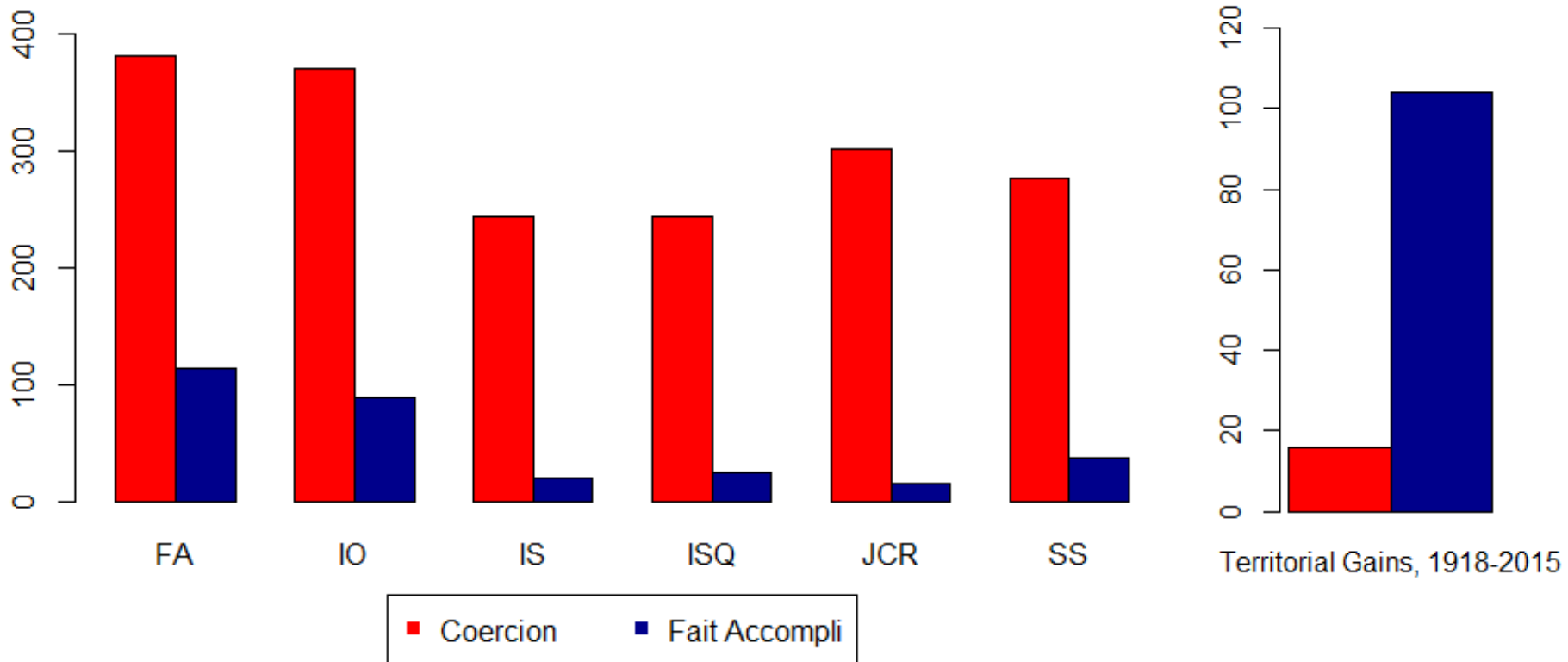


How States Acquired Territory



The Fait Accompli Deserves More Attention

Journal Mentions



Foreign Affairs, International Organization, International Security, International Studies Quarterly, Journal of Conflict Resolution, Security Studies

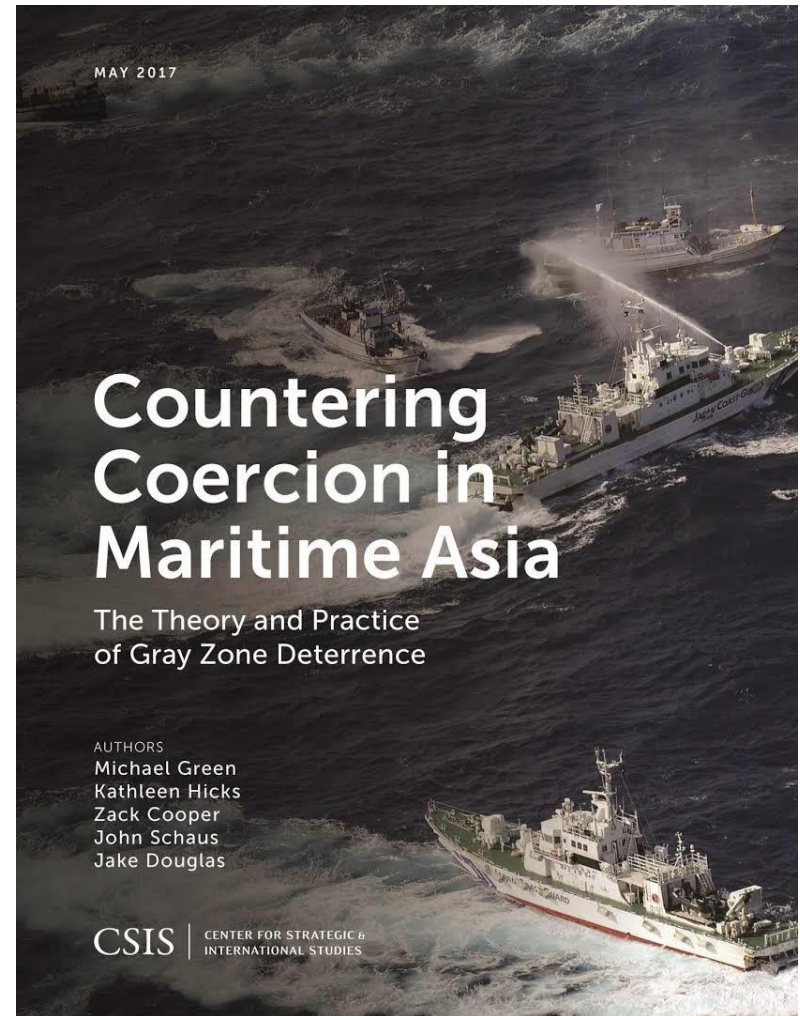


Overusing Coercion = Underutilizing Fait Accompli

How did each side reach their current positions?

How well have purely verbal demands and threats worked?

Is coercion truly the best analytical lens here?



Chinese Land Reclamation in the Spratly Islands

Is land reclamation coercion?
Or a fait accompli?

Can it be stopped by a
fait accompli?

Two rival ways to approach the issue:

1. Balance of resolve; the resolute side out-coerces the other
2. Who has the better unilateral (fait accompli) card to play?



The Dangers of Over-Emphasizing Coercion

“We're going to have to send China a clear signal that first, the island-building stops, and second, your access to those islands also not going to be allowed.”

-Rex Tillerson, U.S. Secretary of State

Senate Confirmation Hearing, January 12, 2017



Island Disputes Involving China

A Chinese “island grab” should be Scenario #1

- ▶ Beijing is unlikely to try an ultimatum and less likely to succeed if it does

Seizing islands has happened fairly often

- ▶ 36 (28 unique) “island grabs” since 1918

Seizing islands usually has not provoked war

- ▶ Just once since 1918: the Falklands

Not once in the last century has a third party fired a shot to defend the victim of an island grab

Island Disputes Involving China

Taiwan: usual scenarios are invasion, blockade, & coercive bombing, but...

- ▶ A fait accompli in Itu Aba or Kinmen and Mazu deserves to join that list

Senkakus: The absence of a Japanese tripwire is a serious vulnerability.

- ▶ Japan should understand that deploying troops as a tripwire is a risk, but the window of opportunity to ever do so gradually closes as China grows.
- ▶ If China seizes only the largest island, Japan may respond by occupying smaller islands that remain vacant.
 - ▶ A third option besides attacking to retake the islands or relenting to the Chinese presence under protest (sanctions, etc.)

Spratlys: China may exploit temporary evacuations due to severe weather to seize islands without firing a shot.

- ▶ Important not to dither in re-occupying current positions

Russian “Green Men” in Eastern Europe



Location: Perivalne (Crimea)

Source: AP/dpa

Is the Fait Accompli the Primary Challenge for Deterrence in the 21st Century?

My answer: quite possibly

- ▶ Not the most severe threat (nuclear attack)
- ▶ Not the most likely threat (terrorism)
- ▶ Nonetheless, a miscalculated Russian or Chinese fait accompli probably ranks as the most likely pathway to war with either

To counter faits accomplis, focus on deterrence and reversal rather than defense

Credible deterrence against brute force attacks does not imply credible deterrence against faits accomplis

- ▶ A clear declaratory policy is no panacea

Tripwires are often the best policy tool for deterring faits accomplis

- ▶ West Berlin as precedent
- ▶ Deploying tripwires can itself be a provocation (and a fait accompli)
- ▶ Whose troops? Allied tripwires may not be enough. U.S. tripwires may not be worth the risks and costs.

Underlying Research

“By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2017), pp. 881-891.

“Advancing without Attacking: The Strategic Game around the Use of Force,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2018), pp. 58-88.

“The Evolution of Territorial Conquest after 1945,” Under Review

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