Us Versus Them: Ethnic Inequality, Diversionary Nationalism, and International Conflict

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Abstract: How does political inequality among ethnic groups motivate governments to engage in international conflicts? Previous research suggests that ethnic political inequality leads to internal instability and civil conflict. Yet, the impact of such political inequality on international conflicts is less clear. This study addresses this gap by proposing that states who exclude large ethnic populations from the political system (1) generate deep grievances along ethnic lines and (2) make state leaders depend more on a narrower ethnic coalition for political survival. Such structural political inequality limits the state's ability to adequately address domestic turmoil via co-optation and repression, since these solutions either upset the ethnic groups in power or are too costly to implement. These constraints prompt leaders of ethnically exclusive states to turn to diversionary conflict, especially against international rivals, to increase their co-ethnics' cohesion and rally for their support. Statistical models of over 2800 dyads of states between 1946 and 2014 (totaling over 112,000 dyad-years) supports this argument. In addition, the findings show that, when states face both severe ethnic inequality and domestic turmoil, they are especially belligerent against not only rivals but particularly rivals who marginalize the home state's ethnic groups in power.

Introduction

How do unequal power relations between ethnic groups affect a state's decision to engage in international conflict? The inequality-conflict nexus is a robust relationship established by research in intrastate conflict (Bartusevičius 2014; Cederman et al. 2013; 2011; Hillesund et al. 2018; Buhaug et al. 2014). Yet, the link between ethnic inequality and international conflict is still a subject of growing literature. While previous studies in the international conflict literature have explored the role of overall inequality in shaping states' external violent behavior, ethnic political inequality usually remains outside of the focus.

Research on irredentism and diversionary conflict have hinted that ethnic inequality is an important factor that pushes leaders to start interstate disputes. Despite this, ethnic political inequality has mainly been mentioned as a moderating variable in the background. One the one hand, the literature on nationalist-irredentist conflict discusses ethnic dominance's importance in incentivizing leaders to utilize aggressive and nationalist foreign policies, yet does not specify under which circumstances would political inequality motivate leaders to start international conflicts (Goemans and Schultz 2017; Saideman and Ayres 2008). On the other hand, although diversionary conflict research highlights factors that drive elites to pursue interstate conflicts, it has not directly examined ethnic political inequality as a key condition.

This study seeks to address this gap and connect both sets of literature by paying direct attention to how unequal access to state resources and powers affects the way states wage conflicts against international targets. Such an endeavor is important for at least two reasons. First, research in both the inequality-international conflict and diversionary conflict literature have found that leaders can sometimes initiate externally conflict to divert the population's attention from domestic

problems and rally the public through nationalism (Oakes 2012; Butcher 2021; Fordham 1998; Mitchell and Prins 2004; Lee et al. 2022). While diversionary conflict still remains a subject of contention (Fravel 2010), the abundance of both quantitative and case evidence *at least* suggests diversion as a possible path to international conflict. Such rally-round-the-flag mechanism is often associated with in-group/out-group dynamics, which essentially maintains that conflict with an external group can increase the sense of belonging and cohesion within a group, along with increased support for the leader of the in-group (Butcher 2021; Haynes 2016; Theiler 2018). As such, international conflict, especially for diversionary purposes, is a phenomenon rooted in the politics of identity (Haynes 2016).

Yet, ethnic identity – one of the most common and salient identity in politics across the globe – has rarely been examined as a potential motivator of interstate conflict. A recent exception to this is Haynes's (2016) investigation of ethnic diversity (fragmentation and polarization) as a driver of diversion. Contributing to this work, a focus on ethnic political inequality provides a deeper look at how ethnic identities are mobilized, and how such potential mobilizations pose threats that motivate the leader to pursue costly solutions, such as international conflicts. A clearer understanding of ethnic inequality improves our understanding of a significant chunk of the overall international conflict behavior.

Second, a clearer understanding of how power relations between ethnic groups affect states' international behavior is relevant to our practical understanding of world politics. Very few countries in the modern world are close to being ethnically homogenous – with few exceptions such as Japan and North Korea. Even in relatively less diverse countries such as Saudi Arabia or Germany, the population size of ethnic minorities are still notable – let alone more average countries like Zimbabwe (Alesina et al. 2003). Ethnic identities therefore can have important

implications for political behavior of most member states in the international system. Additionally, given the recent rise in nationalism as well as mounting pressure from excluded groups for more representation or even self-determination (Peleg 2007; Wimmer 2012), it is both interesting and important to examine how ethnic power relations impact leaders' turn to aggressive rhetoric and military actions that reinforce the nationalist narrative.

Borrowing from bodies of literature on civil war, irredentism, and diversionary conflict, my research investigates how ethnically unequal access to state power creates pressure for leaders to start conflicts, both in general as well as during domestic instability. This study argues that ethnic (political) inequality makes ethnic identities more salient, promoting forms of ethnic/exclusionary nationalism for ethnic groups in power while generating grievances for excluded ethnic groups. Such elements create a baseline condition where, for survival, state leaders have to appease their narrow ethnic coalition of EGIPs while mitigating the threats from those excluded ethnic groups.

Domestic security crises (particularly mass unrest) serve as catalysts that potentially worsen these tensions and threaten the leader (or even state) survival. Facing this double threat, states can respond by carrying out one or several of the major policy directions: repression, co-optation/accommodation, and diversion (Oakes 2012; 2006; Morgan and Palmer 2000; Davies 2016; 2002). A policy option is chosen when state leaders perceive it to be doable and profitable for survival: For states whose EGEs make up large proportions of the population, structural inequality limits the feasibility and/or usefulness of repression and cooptation. This, along with the pressure created by the situation, makes diversionary conflict more attractive, prompting state leaders to initiate interstate conflict to increase coherence among the EGIPs and rally for their

support – especially if there exists an international rivalry that marginalizes the home state's ethnic kin.

The findings in the study provide supporting evidence for this argument. Specifically, states who exclude a large ethnic population from access to executive power are more likely to start international disputes as a response to increasing domestic mass unrest. Interestingly, when states experience high levels of only one problem (either ethnic inequality or domestic turmoil), they are more combative but less discriminative between rival and non-rival targets – even though rivals are still the more likely targets. In contrast, when facing high levels of both problems simultaneously, states are more likely to target opponents that are their international rivals. The probability of conflict is especially high when such rival targets also marginalize the home state's ethnic kin, which provide embattled leaders with the opportunity to frame these conflicts in ethnic nationalist terms to rally their co-ethnics.

Consistent with previous studies, these results demonstrate that ethnic nationalism, promoted by international conflict, is a viable option for leaders to solve political issues. Additionally, it shows how ethnic political inequality can produce underlying conditions that threaten not only stability at home but also abroad. With a recent surge in nationalist and populist sentiments across the globe, this finding may help us to better explain and anticipate how identity politics in a country – particularly with respect to ethnic groups – can shape its conflict behavior, thereby having a deeper understanding of internal forces that can potentially create violence and instability across borders.

Inequality, Identity Politics and Conflict: A Literature Review

Overall, the role of political inequality among ethnic groups has been a focal point of civil conflict research, with influential studies establishing and testing the link between ethnic political inequality and civil war. However, studies of international conflict have been different: even though many studies have shown ethnic inequality to be an important factor in the outbreak of interstate disputes and irredentist conflicts, imbalance of political access and resources among ethnic groups has mainly been mentioned as a moderating variable in the background.

Key Concepts

Before discussing past research as well as theoretical mechanisms linking ethnic inequality to diversionary conflict, a discussion of key concepts is in order. This study follows the Weberian tradition and defined *ethnicity and ethnic identity* as people's subjective belief in their common descent due to similarities in their phenotypical traits and/or customs, regardless of whether such commonalities actually exist (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 35).A major type of such commonalities revolve around common ancestry and descent-based attributes (Horowitz 1985; Fearon and Laitin 2000).

Intertwined but distinct from ethnicity, *nationalism* is a sentiment that unifies individuals who share a collective belief in *a larger political community* (the nation) as well as *the state* that represents that community (Marx 2003, 5; Tudor and Slater 2021). In other words, while national and ethnic identity both serve as a unifying belief that bind individuals into a larger collective, nationalism as a belief is distinct in that it (1) may or may not necessarily include descent-based attributes and (2) specifically entails individuals' attachment and obligations to *the state* (Tudor and Slater 2021; Solt 2011).

Next, *ethnic political inequality* is defined as the "imbalance" in access to and control of state power and resources among ethnic groups (Chandra and Wilkinson 2008, 537). While Chandra and Wilkinson include ethnic groups' specific access to the military, the police, education, and the economy as part of their definition, I opt for only the core logic in their conceptualization as it encompasses ethnic access and control of the broader political system – and thus is connected to how ethnic groups perceive themselves and their political realities.

This study's concept of ethnic political inequality taps into one specific aspect of the broader concept of horizontal inequality (or between-group inequality), which is defined as "inequalities in economic, social or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups" (Stewart 2008). The focus of this study is narrower in two ways. For one, this research explicitly focuses on ethnicity as the central type of identity rather than other types of "culturally defined groups". Additionally, the paper also centers its attention on political inequality rather than other dimensions of horizontal inequality.

In this paper, I operationalize ethnic political inequality as the size of politically excluded ethnic groups from state power and resources (Cederman et al. 2011; 2013). By incorporating both political exclusion and size of ethnic groups, this operationalization captures the presence and severity of ethnic exclusion in a political system. Specifically, if large ethnic groups experience exclusion while smaller groups get access to a country's state resources, it is safe to argue that the country's system as a whole has an imbalance/inequality in how political resources (and likely other types of resources) are distributed across ethnic lines.

Political Inequality, Identity, and Conflict Within States

Following the constructivist approach, scholars have established that identities, including ethnic and national, are fluid, non-permanent, and can overlap with each other – depending on the level of shared experiences and history among groups and individuals (Hale 2004; Brubaker 2006; Mylonas and Tudor 2021).

An important implication of this perspective is that ethnic and national identities can be shaped by political actors and social conditions. As the most notable actor, the state has been shown to use policies such as assimilation, accommodation, or exclusion to influence the level of people's national and ethnic attachment (Singh and vom Hau 2016). On the one hand, state policies directly aimed at nation-building can diffuse ethnic tensions and promote a unifying national identity, as found in cases like Tanzania (Miguel 2004). Other than providing public goods such as education and employment, states can even wage wars to increase encourage individuals to identify with the nation-state above their ethnic groups (Robinson 2014; Sambanis et al. 2015).

In contrast, states can also choose to deal with their ethnically diverse population by creating and/or maintaining a system with high levels of horizontal (political) inequality that prioritizes one or a few groups while excluding the others. This creates an important condition that strengthens the sense of intra-group belonging and inter-group cleavages. Given that individuals often have relative comparisons between the status of their group and that of other groups (Brewer 1979; Bettencourt et al. 2001), political, economic, and social inequalities among ethnic groups can lead to a perception of unequal or unjust situation, prompting group members to attribute such injustice to other groups or the government (Buhaug et al. 2014; Cederman et al. 2013). In other words, ethnic inequality – particularly unbalanced access to state power and resources among ethnic groups (i.e., political inequality) – can increase in-group identity and deepens the grievances against the state, who may be view as the perpetrator and/or the upholder of the unjust system.

This backdrop, combined with the fluidity of identities, enables ethnic entrepreneurs to craft narratives that emphasize specific aspects of identity in ways that increase group cohesion and facilitate mobilization against the state (Hillesund et al. 2018; Cederman et al. 2013).

Political Inequality, Identity, and Conflict Between States

How does ethnic political inequality affect conflict at the interstate level? Despite the scholarly focus on political inequality and civil war, there is surprisingly little research on its impact on international conflict. Some research pointed out that ethnic discrimination – a form of political inequality – leads to more interstate disputes (Caprioli and Trumbore 2003; 2006), arguing that discriminative states are more likely to fight because they have less respect for peaceful norms of politics and are likely to view violence as an acceptable form of solution. However, their argument may not necessarily generalize to a broader set of states who exclude (but not necessarily discriminate against) ethnic groups. In addition, this logic assumes that the state simply makes foreign policy from its internal values, overlooking the role of identity politics and the agency of ethnic groups (even the marginalized) in shaping a government's international behavior.

Political inequality among ethnic groups also appears in studies on ethnic nationalism and international conflict. Collectively, these studies show that nationalism is a crucial fuel for conflict between nation-states, especially to reunite with their co-nationals who are separated by territorial borders and ruled by ethnic others (Wimmer 2012; Saideman and Ayres 2008; Shelef 2016). Notably, this phenomenon, also known as irredentist conflict, is most likely in the presence of ethnic political inequality: when a state is ethnically homogenous or dominated by an ethnic majority, political elites are incentivized to pursue policies fueled by ethnic or exclusive

nationalism, including aggressive foreign policy, to appease the dominant ethnic group(s) (Saideman and Ayres 2008; Goemans and Schultz 2017).

Despite the insights on how ethnic and national identity influence conflict, this literature suffers from two gaps. First, even though political hierarchy among ethnic groups (i.e., political inequality) serves as an essential condition that allows nationalists politicians to make wars, the role of ethnic inequality is treated as a moderating variable and remains under-examined. Second, while political exclusion creates structural conditions that incentivize political elites to pursue nationalist policies for their own gains (when necessary), leaders cannot always engage in nationalist wars. Studies of irredentism have not deeply examined conditions or events that make politicians feel the need to engage in such risky conflicts in one year and not the other.

Although not having directly examined the link between ethnic political inequality and international conflict risk, the literature of diversionary conflict offers insights on the types of events and conditions can make aggressive foreign policies become more attractive to political elites. Particularly, internal problems can threaten the elites' hold on power, motivating them to use militarized actions to (1) divert the public's attention from internal problems and (2) rally for political support from domestic audiences (Levy and Vakili 1992, 119).

Among many internal issues causing this phenomenon, domestic strife (particularly events like protests, strikes, riots, and rebellions) stands out as a notable type of political problem that motivates diversionary conflict – since it marks extreme dissatisfaction that mobilize a substantial portion of the populace, mounting a *direct security threat* to the leader and state's rule (Gelpi 1997; Pickering and Kisangani 2005; 2010; Davies 2002). Other types political or economic problems such as low public approval (Derouen 2000; Fordham 2002), inflation (Mitchell and Prins 2004), and low GDP growth (Oneal and Tir 2006) also have a diversion-inducing effect.

The effect of internal problems is even further magnified when political elites operate in structural factors that make diversionary conflict even more feasible and/or beneficial for the elites. For example, states who have low state capacity that are also facing domestic unrest are more likely to turn to diversionary use of force. This is because leaders of low-capacity states have little resources and ability to address domestic turmoil through implementing large-scale reforms or repression, prompting them to use less costly solutions like diversion (Oakes 2012; 2006). Other structural factors such as democratic institutions also limit states' ability to deal with unrest and other problems using repression, thus making diversion more attractive (Kisangani and Pickering 2009).

Although ethnic political inequality significantly influences a state's structural constraints and ability to respond to internal threats and instability, the literature on diversionary conflict has not directly explored its impact. Even though few studies on diversionary conflict found that internal ethnic tensions and conflicts motivate states to also be aggressive internationally (Lake and Rothchild 1998; Trumbore 2003), such research do not focus on the sources of such internal ethnic tensions, and thus are unable to explain why some leaders cannot find ways to resolve the existing ethnic tensions but rather wage costly conflict externally.

Political Inequality and Gaps in the Theoretical Narrative

Overall, ethnic political inequality has been shown as an important variable in both civil and international conflict. However, while civil war scholarship has made it a central explanatory variable of intrastate conflict, few direct investigations have been conducted on how ethnic political inequality influences the state's international conflict behavior. This oversight is important to address. Given its impact on a state's internal politics, ethnic inequality can also have significant impact on how state leaders behave internationally. One the one hand, the literature on

nationalist-irredentist conflict discusses ethnic dominance's importance in incentivizing leaders to utilize aggressive and nationalist foreign policies yet does not specify under which circumstances would leaders be triggered into using such policies. On the other hand, while the literature of diversionary conflict produces much insight into the conditions that fuel elites' decisions to engage in interstate conflicts, it leaves the exploration of ethnic political inequality unattended.

This study addresses this gap by bringing together three different bodies of research in civil conflict, nationalism, and diversionary conflict to directly investigate whether and how ethnic political inequality influences states to be internationally aggressive.

Ethnic Inequality, Nationalism, and Diversionary Conflict: Theory

This study argues that ethnic (political) inequality makes ethnic identities more salient, promoting forms of ethnic/exclusionary nationalism for ethnic groups in power (EGIPs) while generating grievances for ethnic groups excluded (EGEs). Such elements create a baseline condition where ethnic tensions are high, and state leaders are reliant on the support of the narrow ethnic coalition of EGIPs.

Domestic security crises (particularly mass unrest) serve as catalysts that can potentially worsen these tensions and threaten the leader (or even state) survival. Facing this double threat, states can respond by carrying out one or several of the major policy directions: repression, co-optation/accommodation, and diversion (Oakes 2012; 2006; Morgan and Palmer 2000; Davies 2016; 2002). A policy option is chosen when state leaders perceive it to be doable and profitable for state survival: For states whose EGEs make up large proportions of the population, structural inequality limits the feasibility and/or usefulness of repression and cooptation. This, along with the pressure created by the situation, makes diversionary conflict more attractive, prompting state

leaders to initiate interstate conflict to increase coherence among the EGIPs and rally for their support – especially if there exists an international rivalry that marginalizes the home state's ethnic kin.

Political Inequality, Divergent Identities, and Baseline Condition

In the presence of ethnic (political) inequality, one or few ethnic groups have access to most of the state power and resources while excluding others (Chandra and Wilkinson 2008). This structural imbalance of political access leads to a higher salience of ethnic identity, greater tensions among ethnic groups, and increased potential for social conflicts and threats to the state (Singh 2015). This baseline condition is created through a combination of both bottom-up and top-down mechanisms, for the groups in power and groups excluded from the system.

On the one hand, for members of the *ethnic groups being excluded (EGEs)***,** political inequality increases saliency of ethnic over the national identity and generates ethnic-based grievances. Particularly, unequal access to state resources make EGEs' members to perceive social reality and life opportunities as mainly shaped by their ethnic identities (Singh 2015), causing disadvantaged ethnics to grow an attachment to their group identities, reduce their attachment to the national identity, and hold durable grievances (Singh and vom Hau 2016; Cederman et al. 2013; Wimmer 2017). This pattern has been documented both in Africa and across the globe: individuals are found to identify more with the nation if their ethnic group is in power, while they are more likely to identify with their ethnic group if they are not represented in the executive branch (Green 2018; Wimmer 2017). The combined ethnic attachment and frustrations of EGEs form underlying conditions that can lead to social conflicts threatening the state's rule (Singh and vom Hau 2016; Wimmer 2017; Cederman et al. 2013).

On the other hand, favorable access to the political system can make members of *ethnic group(s) in power (EGIPs)* develop a sense of ethnic nationalism (Wimmer 2017). As a more exclusive form of nationalism, ethnic nationalism entails stronger pride and attachment to the nation and state yet legitimizes ethnic hierarchies among a country's own citizens. Put differently, ethnic nationalism justifies the marginalization of other ethnic groups in favor of one or a few groups (Tudor and Slater 2021; Mylonas and Tudor 2021).

For state leaders, political inequality along ethnic cleavages also means that their political survival is tied to the political support of a narrower set of population – the EGIPs. Given the logic of political survival, political elites are incentivized to form policies that appeal to their ethnic constituency even at the expense of other groups (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Saideman and Ayres 2008; Carment 1993; Carment and James 1995). This reduces state elites' incentives to expand the state capacity and public services across the whole population, limiting public goods instead to their preferred ethnic group(s) (Singh and vom Hau 2014, 248; Wimmer et al. 2009; Wimmer 2002).

The opposite development of identities and perceptions among the EGIPs and EGEs becomes a breeding ground for ethnic tensions – especially when the state marginalizes ethnic groups with large populations. Posner (2004) found that group size is a key factor that allows political entrepreneurs to mobilize groups. In countries whose political structures exclude large ethnic groups, the imbalanced resources distribution, along with grievances and strong ethnic identity, will further fuel distributional conflicts over state resources along ethnic lines. These create underlying conditions that *potentially* give rise to more intense (and even violent) forms of mobilization against the state (Singh and vom Hau 2016; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013).

Such potential for mobilization makes the state's political elites to be even more aware when making policies. Because marginalized ethnic groups with large sizes can be perceived as latent threats to the state, leaders now must think about not only appealing to the EGIPs supporters but also keeping the EGEs' grievances from turning into mobilization against the state.

Domestic Turmoil, Policy Options and Constraints

Domestic crises can serve as catalytic events upsetting the state's effort to maintain a fragile power imbalance among ethnic groups. While there are a multitude of domestic problems that can face a government, domestic strife (or mass unrest) is perhaps the most direct and thus salient domestic problem for the state.[1] Physical threats such as mass unrest can potentially emerge from two sources: opposition within the EGIPs and peripheral opposition representing EGEs. Mass unrest organized by members of EGIPs arise when segments within the state's own co-ethnic base want to express their dissatisfaction with the government's performance. On the other hand, mass unrest organized by members of EGEs reflects anti-state threats that have been transformed from the underlying grievances of the marginalized ethnics.

Even though the two sources of mass unrest are different in nature, I argue that they threaten the state in similar ways. First, whether the unrest comes from the state's co-ethnic members or ethnic others, such security crises pose direct challenges to the state elites' rule. Second, regardless of the source, domestic unrest also creates indirect threats against the state by

[1] Evidence of economic problems' impact on diversionary conflict are mixed (Mitchell and Prins 2004; Pickering and Kisangani 2010; 2005; Wiegand 2018). As such, rather than focusing on economic issues that may or may not lead to mobilized oppositions, I direct my attention to actual mobilizations that pose direct threats to the government.
I also discuss the role of economic problems in the discussion section and explored the effect of inflation as a proxy for economic performance in **appendix E**.

serving as inspiration for other potential oppositions who have yet to mobilize (including those who represent EGEs).

Dealing with this dual threat is immensely difficult, given that, to achieve political survival, state elites must balance between appeasing the EGIPs and keeping the latent threats from the EGEs at bay. This means that when facing domestic unrest, state leaders must respond in a way that maintains an unequal political structure that benefits group(s) in power, while paying attention to how its response is being watched by the marginalized ethnic groups who have yet to mobilize.

Facing such threats, states can respond in three main ways: accommodation, repression, and diversion – with one set of policy substituting or supplementing the others As rational actors, state leaders will choose the optimal response – either a single or combined policies – depending on the constraints and opportunity available (Oakes 2012; 2006; Morgan and Palmer 2000; Davies 2016; 2002).

First, the state can accommodate (or co-opt) demands of the opposition (whether they represent marginalized ethnicities or not). While this is possible, this may not be a path preferred by the state (if at all), especially if it excludes large ethnic groups. This is because co-optation of an opposition group in this situation may not only (1) be costly but also (2) invite future challenges from the EGEs. If the demands come from opposition segments within the EGIPs, co-optation is difficult even if state leaders want to. When a state marginalizes a large portion of the population, state authorities tend to focus their resources on providing public goods for their own ethnic supporters, which in turn limits the state's both extractive and administrative ability to other parts of the population (Singh and vom Hau 2014; Wimmer 2002). This ultimately limits state capacity to mobilize resources and implement reforms that are necessary to address mass unrest (Oakes 2006; 2012).

Co-optation is even harder if the demands come from marginalized ethnic groups. In addition to the limited capacity, the state may also have little willingness for accommodating the ethnic others as co-optation can motivate other groups to mobilize and make further demands to the state in the future (Walter 2006). Additionally, co-opting the marginalized may threaten the benefits of both state elites and their co-ethnics. Letting large groups join the table means the EGIPs may lose not only a large share of spoils but potentially the political power altogether – as there is no guarantee that, once allowed access to state resources, such significantly sizable groups will not use the newfound powers to retaliate or exclude the group(s) currently in charge (Kaufmann and Haklai 2008; Peleg 2007). Indeed, research shows that dominant groups tend to view the opening of the political system for other actors as a "collective suicide" (Peleg 2007, 67–68), giving state leaders even lower willingness to accommodate marginalized ethnic groups.

Because of this, the state can (and often do) turn to the second option – repression – to maintain their dominance. Indeed, evidence suggests that repression is a common strategy for states facing domestic unrest (Davenport et al. 2019; Davies 2016). However, repression alone may not be enough in the face of domestic crises. If the unrest comes from segments within the EGIPs, then repression would be politically costly for states with high levels of ethnic exclusion. This is because repressing co-ethnic dissidents can decrease the cohesion and support of the very ethnic base that state leaders desperately need to survive.

Of course, the state can opt to selectively repress specific ethnic groups – either as a domestic diversion to rally co-ethnics[2] or as a direct response to unrest organized by the excluded group (Martinez Machain and Rosenberg 2018; Tir and Jasinski 2008). However, this may only

[2] This is also known as domestic diversion (Martinez-Machain and Rosenberg 2018; Tir and Jasinski 2008)

work when such excluded groups are minorities. The larger the excluded group(s), the more costly repression can become.

This is because repression repressing citizens requires resources – especially if used at a large scale for a sustained period (Martinez Machain and Rosenberg 2018; Oakes 2006). Furthermore, even if the state has enough resources to commit to effective repression, coercive policies are probably already used a lot by an ethnically exclusive state to maintain its system – even in the absence of crises (Rørbæk and Knudsen 2017). Thus, during times of mass unrest, additional repression may not help significantly with addressing the threats at hand.

With both co-optation and repression becoming inadequate, diversionary conflict becomes a more attractive option for ethnically exclusive states – whose elites depend on their ethnic selectorate's support. First, diversionary conflict against an external target allows leaders to frame political issues in ethno-nationalist terms, directing attention toward a scapegoat and increasing the cohesion and support of the state's own ethnic base – without the cost of repressing or co-opting their demands (Gagnon 1994). The already stronger sense of ethno-nationalism among the EGIPs' members in ethnically exclusive states further lower the costs and increase the gains of aggressive foreign policy actions (Wimmer 2017; Green 2018; Saideman and Ayres 2008; Mylonas and Tudor 2021). Indeed, evidence shows that states' engagement in external conflicts increase ingroup members' ethno-nationalist sentiments, social cohesion, and for their leaders (Sambanis et al. 2015; Haynes 2016; Theiler 2018).

Second, diversionary use of force can also serve as a show of strength to the marginalized ethnic groups, deterring them from challenging the state. Previous research suggests that external conflicts can increase leaders' domestic support by demonstrating their competence. The assumption is that the public tend to view active leaders in the international arena as more capable

and confident (Smith 1998; Fordham 1998; Ostrom and Job 1986; Haynes 2017). Following this logic, it is possible that leaders expect a show of force against an external foe will deter potential challengers (particularly outgroups) against the government.

Given these reasons, I expect the probability of external diversion will increase when leaders of ethnically exclusive states face domestic turmoil. Evidence suggest this pattern: states tend to employ external conflict as a diversionary tactics when facing severe domestic problems, either as a supplement or substitution to repression and cooptation (Davies 2002; Oakes 2012). Diversion is a particularly attractive option for states whose capacity is too low to provide public goods and services in times of crises (Lee et al. 2022).

> **Hypothesis 1**: *States with larger excluded ethnic groups are more likely to initiate international conflict when they face domestic turmoil.*

Of course, this does not mean that diversionary conflict is actually effective in mitigating the intense problems facing state leaders. Although there are evidence – both quantitative analyses as well as individuals cases like Putin's dramatic rise in public support after Russia's annexation of Crimea – suggesting that diversion increase the in-group members' support for the leader (Kisangani and Pickering 2009; Theiler 2018), my focus is on the leader's *perception* that external use of force may help increasing co-ethnics' support while demonstrating strength to domestic challengers.

Rivalry, Transnational Kinship and Diversionary Opportunity

While the presence of political inequality and domestic turmoil raises the overall probability of conflict, I also suspect that the probability of conflict is higher for specific types of targets. In other words, struggling leaders are much more likely to start diversionary fights when

there exists the opportunity to do so. This is because leaders in a good reasoning for starting a costly international conflict – and thus randomly targeting any type of states can make domestic audiences punish the leader even more. To distract their in-group audiences from domestic issues and rally for their support, leaders need a target that is both recognizable and justifiable.

International rivals stand out as the ideal type of target for such diversionary goal (Mitchell and Prins 2004; Mitchell and Thyne 2010; Lee et al. 2022). First, ongoing rivalry has been shown as an ideal type of conflict opportunity (Lee et al. 2022). Generally, an international rivalry entails tensions about salient issues between two or more states (Colaresi et al. 2008; Diehl and Goertz 2001). A history of hostilities and contentious issues provides opportunities which embattled leaders can capitalize and escalate into militarized disputes. Indeed, rivals tend to fight frequently and repeatedly (Thompson et al. 2022).

Second, an international rival can be easily recognizable and framed as the enemy. Rivals tend to view each other as enemies and competitors, making rivalries recognizable and easily known to the public (Thompson et al. 2022; Thompson and Dreyer 2011). A rival's ability to be portrayed as a grave threat to the in-group makes it an ideal target, given the goal is to invoke a sense of in-group cohesion and ethno-nationalism as well as direct the audiences' attention to the common foe. In other words, I argue that the existence of an ongoing rivalry as a conflict opportunity can change the conflict calculus of ethnically unequal states, making conflicts more likely to occur against the rival targets.

> **Hypothesis 2:** *States with larger marginalized ethnic groups and facing domestic turmoil are more likely to initiate conflict against international rivals (compared to non-rival targets)*.

But which type of rivals would offer the best opportunity for a state where ethnic political inequality is widespread? Given the goal of rallying for the in-group members' support, leaders of an ethnically exclusive state will be most likely to target rivals that have ethnic ties with the home state – particularly those rivals that marginalize the home state's EGIP(s). Such targets offer home state leaders not only the opportunity (ongoing rivalry) for diversion but also the highest ability to rally their co-ethnic group(s), which is convenient for the home state's leadership given their reliance on their co-ethnic members' support, especially in times of turmoil.

Particularly, the existence of ethnic kin group(s) in another state allows home state's leaders to justify the conflict as an effort to reclaim their homeland and recue their kins who are ruled by ethnic others in a rival enemy (Saideman and Ayres 2008; Goemans and Schultz 2017; Shelef 2016). If the home state's EGIPs are excluded from political power in the target state (especially a negatively perceived rival), then politicizing such issues can further provoke stronger feelings of co-ethnic's in-group commitment and bias against the outgroup. As such, the embattled leaders in the home state have even more incentives to initiate conflict against such a target to improve their legitimacy and political support (Carment and James 1995; Goemans and Schultz 2017).

Hypothesis 3: *States that have high ethnic exclusion and face domestic turmoil will be most likely to start conflict against rivals who marginalize the home state's EGIP.*

Research Design & Data[3]

To test the proposed hypotheses, this study employs a series of statistical analyses – particularly logistic regression – to examine whether a state with high ethnic political inequality

[3] Descriptive statistics for dependent and independent variables are included in **Appendix A**.

and facing domestic turmoil is more likely to start militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) with other states. The sample of the analyses include politically relevant dyads (PRDs) across the globe from 1946 – 2014.[4] This means that I include pairs of states that either (1) have at least one major power or (2) are contiguous through land or water. Due to the already rare nature of MIDs as well as the very high number of all potential (directed) dyads in the time frame (over 1 million observations), this restriction to PRDs is meant to include only dyads that have opportunity for conflict.

The use of directed dyad years is suitable for the analysis as it takes into account which state in a pair is initiating the conflict, which fits with a test for diversionary theory of conflict. In addition, the structure of the directed dyad-year data makes it easier to include control variables that are inherently dyadic in nature and are abundantly available for dyad data. The list of initiating states (state A) and target states (state B) for this research is drawn from the Dyadic Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) Data 4.02 in the Correlates of War project (Maoz et al. 2018).

Dependent Variable

The main dependent variable will be a dichotomous indicator of a militarized interstate dispute in a dyad. MID events are defined as cases of conflict in which the threat, display, use of military force, or war by an internationally recognized state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state (Maoz et al. 2018). The outcome variable shows a value of 1 if a state initiates a MID against the target state in the directed-dyad in a given year. The variable shows a value of 0 otherwise. The data is drawn from the Dyadic Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID) database (Maoz et al. 2018).

[4] The data for independent variable (ethnic inequality) is available from 1946, while the MID dataset ends in 2014 – hence the 1946-2014 time period.

Independent Variables

Ethnic Political Inequality: Data to measure the level of political inequality among ethnic groups is drawn from the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset (Vogt et al. 2015). The dataset includes only politically relevant ethnic groups, defined as groups that either (1) have at least one significant political organization claiming to represent the interests of such groups in national politics or (2) are systematically discriminated against in politics. Given its focus on politically relevant groups, the EPR data includes ethnic groups that can potentially be mobilized, which fits with this study's theoretical mechanism.

The variable used in this study is the *degree of ethnic exclusion from executive government*. Particularly, it is the population share of excluded ethnic groups (those that do not monopolize, dominate, or enter executive ruling coalitions as senior or junior partners) relative to state's entire population. This variable is taken from GROWUP, an EPR 's program (Vogt et al. 2015). The ethnic exclusion variable is lagged for one year to ensure that the political inequality among ethnic groups precedes the current year's conflict.

Mass Unrest: This study uses a common measure of domestic turmoil taken from the Cross-National Time-Series data (Banks and Wilson 2022). The initial count variable captures the total number of riots, strikes, and mass public demonstrations for each country in each year. These events are signs that a portion of a country's population is frustrated with the government's performance and has decided to mobilize, making it appropriate to test my argument. In addition, the variable is an indication of the government's poor performance in many aspects, not just the economy. Thus, it is an overall good measure for this study. I *lag* the unrest variable one year to ensure that it is prior to conflict.

Ongoing Rivalry: Following previous research on international rivalries, this study adopts the definition of a rivalry as "antagonistic relationships between comparable competitors who regard each other as threatening enemies" (Thompson et al. 2022, 26). This definition is chosen for two reasons. First, unlike the alternative approach of detecting rivalries based on two states' historical frequency of conflict, the perceptual approach avoids using information on conflict to capture rivalries, thereby avoiding using conflict information to explain conflict outcomes. Second, besides excluding states who are too disproportionate in power to compete, this definition focuses on the perception of states' decision makers on which opponents are viewed as "threatening enemies". This ensures that decision makers on both sides are aware of the threats posed by each other, and that leaders also take the existence of the opponent into account when making policies. This perceptual aspect also increases the chance that ongoing rivals are known and visual to the public in the home state – making them prime targets for diversion.

Following this definition, the study draws the data on ongoing rival dyads from Thompson, Sakuwa, and Suhas (2022). This data is compiled and reported in their book, and then gathered into a dataset file by (Miller 2022). The variable Ongoing Rivalry shows the value of 1 indicates that a pair of states are identified as rivals and a value of 0 for otherwise.

Ethnic Ties in Rival Target: To test the third hypothesis, a variable capturing whether a home state (state A) has ethnic kin(s) in a rival target. Drawing on the Transborder Ethnic Kin dataset from the EPR database (Vogt et al. 2015), I created an ordered categorical variable combining information about rivalry and transborder ethnic kinships. This three-level variable indicates whether the potential target is not a rival of the home state (0), a rival but has does not include or marginalize the home state's EGIP (1), and a rival where the EGIP(s) in the home state

are marginalized (2). This set up enables me to compare the effects of ethnic kinship in rivals to that of rivals without the home state's EGIP(s).

Control Variables

Ethnic Fractionalization: Ethnic diversity has been shown to be a baseline condition that influences the risk of diversionary international conflict (Haynes 2016). I thus include a measure of ethnic fragmentation from the Composition of Religious and Ethnic Groups (CREG) project (Nardulli et al. 2012). The method of calculation for the measure is the commonly used Herfindahl-Hirschman concentration index, which was introduced by Alesina et al. (2003). The fractionalization variable will ensure that the effect of ethnic inequality on MID is not due to ethnic diversity itself.

Relative Capabilities: This study accounts for the power of both states in a dyad by employing an indicator of relative power – *side A's (challenger) share of the dyad's total CINC score*. The CINC score is taken from the Correlates of War's (COW) National Material Capabilities dataset. It is an index – ranging from 0 to 1 – capturing a country's military capabilities based on its total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military expenditure, and number of military personnel (Singer et al. 1972). The more powerful state A is relative to state B (potential target), the more likely A is to start a MID.

Foreign Policy Similarity: To account for the tendency for two countries with different foreign policy interests to fight, this study follows past IR studies and includes a measure of similarity between two countries' alliance portfolio (Sweeney and Keshk 2005). I use the s-score to with binary alliance calculated by the *peacesciencer* package in R (Miller 2022).

Trade Dependence: To account for the level of interdependence between the 2 sides of the dyad, I include a measure of the total trade volume between 2 states (side A and B) in the dyad. The data for this measurement is taken from Gleditsch (2002). More interdependent pairs of countries are expected to fight less.

Distance: the study also includes a measurement of the minimum distance between the two states in a dyad (in kilometers). The original data for this measure is calculated by cshapes 2.0 (Schvitz et al. 2022) and extracted through the *peacesciencer* package (Miller 2022). This inclusion is aimed at accounting for the loss of strength gradient that can affect the likelihood of conflict between two countries. The further away the two states are, the less likely they are expected to fight.

Polity2 Scores:[5] I include polity scores for both state A and B to account for two things: the openness of state A's political system and the democratic peace effect. First, the inclusion of state A's polity score controls for the possibility that more democratic regimes are more inclusive of ethnic groups. Second, the inclusion of polity scores for both state A and B also accounts for the established tendency that two democracies are less likely to fight each other. Additionally, including both polity scores (instead of the common Joint Democracy dummy variable) has the bonus effect of preserving more regime-related information and variation, making estimation process easier. These scores are drawn from the Polity5 project (Marshall and Gurr 2020). The score ranges from -10 (most autocratic) to 10 (most democratic).

Temporal dependence: In this study, time dependence is controlled for by a measure of peace years in a dyad – in other words, the number of years since a pair of states last fought a

[5] I estimated the models with Joint Democracy replacing Polity2 scores, results remain mostly similar (appendix D).

militarized dispute – along with the spared and cubic terms of peace years. This aims to control for the fact that two countries that have longer peace periods are less likely to fight.

Analysis[6]

The results for hypotheses 1 and 2 are shown in table 1. Particularly, I estimate two models with the inclusion of a two-way interaction term between ethnic inequality and domestic unrest (model 1) and a three-way interaction term between ethnic inequality, domestic unrest, and ongoing rivalry (model 2). Both models suggest that the proxy measure for ethnic political inequality – ethnic exclusion (the share of excluded ethnic population from executive government) – has a statistically significant (main effect) coefficients at the 0.01 level. This suggests that ethnic political inequality is positively associated with a higher probability of international conflict initiated by a state.

Most of the control variables behave as expected. Overall, a state (state A) is more likely to initiate an MID against the target if the A is less democratic and has higher military capabilities than B. Conflict is also more likely to occur if states in the dyad have lower foreign policy similarity, smaller distance, and shorter peaceful periods of relations. Interestingly, the coefficient for ethnic fractionalization is not statistically different from zero, suggesting that ethnic diversity does not always lead to aggression – the key is perhaps whether and how such diversity is politicized by the unequal power configurations.

[6] I conducted some robustness checks using the random effects (REs) estimator and rare events maximum likelihood estimators (penalized MLE). There are differences in the results, but the conclusion drawn from these checks is largely the same. Results of the REs and rare events models are shown in **Appendices B and C**, respectively.

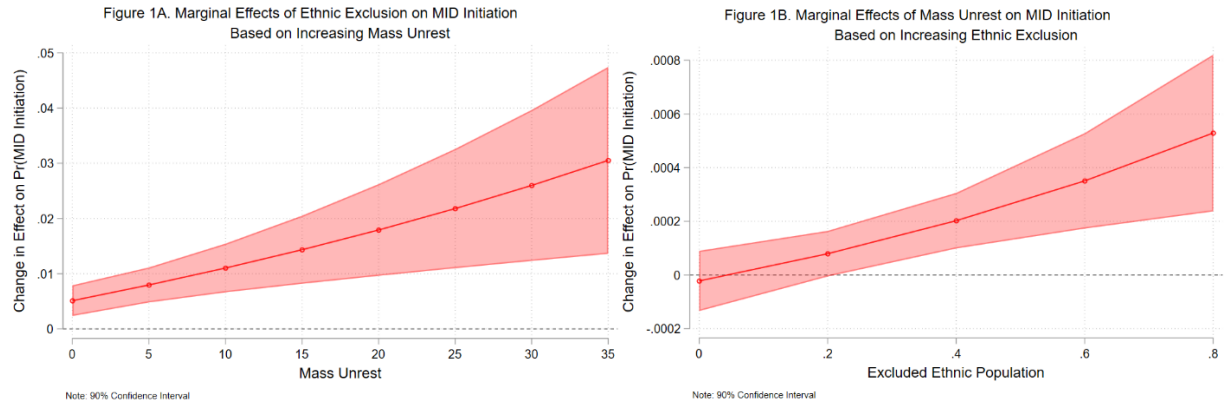
Table 1. Logistic Regression of MID Initiation

	Model 1 Inequality-Mass Unrest	Model 2 Three-way Interaction
DV: MID Initiation		
Ethnic Exclusion	0.460***	0.555***
	(0.152)	(0.189)
Mass Unrest	-0.002	-0.003
	(0.007)	(0.008)
Ethnic Exclusion * Mass Unrest	**0.046****	**0.042****
	(0.018)	**(0.020)**
Ongoing Rivalry	___	**1.345*****
		(0.133)
Ongoing Rivalry * Ethnic Exclusion	___	**-0.804*****
		(0.294)
Ongoing Rivalry * Mass Unrest	___	**-0.004**
		(0.018)
Ongoing Rivalry * Ethnic Exclusion * Mass Unrest	___	**0.021**
		(0.054)
Ethnic Fractionalization	-0.069	0.010
	(0.170)	(0.160)
Side A's Relative Capabilities	0.417***	0.477***
	(0.106)	(0.114)
Dyad's Trade Volume	0.000***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
FP Similarity	-1.494***	-1.343***
	(0.237)	(0.183)
Polity Score A	-0.028***	-0.022***
	(0.006)	(0.006)
Polity Score B	0.004	0.011*
	(0.006)	(0.006)
Distance	-0.000***	-0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Peace Years	-0.351***	-0.293***
	(0.019)	(0.019)
Peace Years^2	0.012***	0.010***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Peace Years^3	-0.000***	-0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Constant	-1.098***	-1.798***
	(0.218)	(0.197)
N	112,241	112,241
N Directed Dyads	2846	2846

Pseudo R^2	0.199	0.217
Log-likelihood	-5862	-5731
χ^2	1624	2440

Clustered (dyad-level) standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The interaction effect between ethnic political inequality and mass unrest is best demonstrated in figure 1. As can be seen from figures 1A and 1B, the interaction effect is positive. Figure 1A shows that when the number of mass unrest is zero, the AME of higher ethnic exclusion on MID initiation is around 0.006. This number increases consistently as the number of internal public unrest in state A of the dyad increases. When domestic unrest in state A becomes more severe, the probability of MID initiation increases to over 0.03 – a five-fold increase in conflict risk. The result supports hypothesis 1 that domestic turmoil poses imminent threats to ruling ethnic group(s), making ethnically unequal states grow even more aggressive as they find diversionary international conflict an attractive option.



The moderating effect of ethnic political inequality (as a moderating factor) is demonstrated via figure 1B. As with many previous studies, mass unrest is found to have a positive effect on MID initiation. However, this effect is only statistically significant once a state excludes more than 20% of its politically relevant ethnic population. In such cases, each additional mass unrest event (riot, demonstration, or strike) is associated with a 0.0001 increase in the probability

of MID initiation by the home state (state A). When the population share of all excluded ethnic groups is 0.8, each additional mass unrest event results in almost 0.0005 increase in MID initiation probability – again, a five-fold increase.

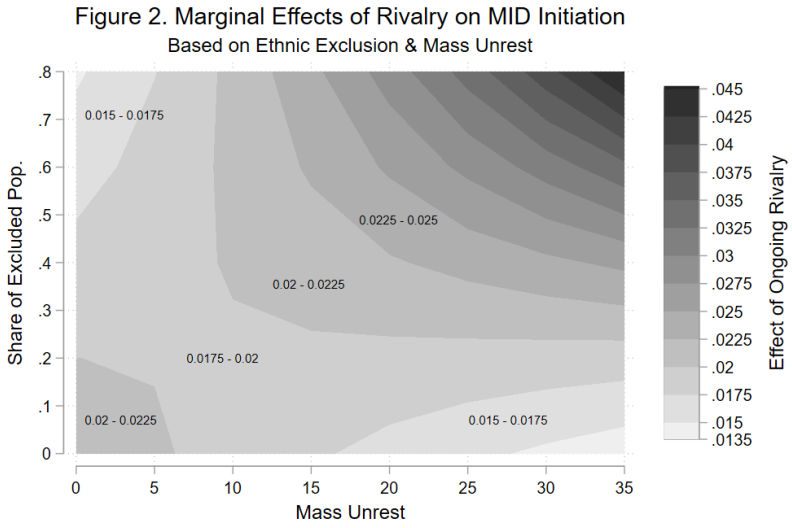
Three-Way Interaction: Ethnic Inequality, Domestic Turmoil, and Ongoing Rivalry

To test hypothesis 2, I include a three-way interaction between ethnic exclusion, mass unrest, and ongoing rivalry in model 2. While the three-way interactive effects can be explored by estimating a model with a 2-way interaction term (usually between two continuous variables) for 2 subsamples (one for non-rival dyads and the other for rival dyads), I opt to estimate a model with a three-way interaction term due to two reasons. First, I am interested in not only whether MID probability against rival targets is higher than that against non-rival targets but also *by how much*. In other words, I care about the effect of the presence of an ongoing rivalry on MID initiation probability – conditional to the levels of ethnic exclusion and mass unrest. To do so, I need to be able to calculate the difference in MEs between when a rivalry is present (the treatment) and non-rivals (the baseline condition). Splitting the sample into multiple samples does not allow me to make such calculations.

Second, because the two subsamples will be vastly different in terms of size, diversity, etc., the findings for the two sub-samples may be incomparable. For example, there are only over 6,200 dyad-years (about 4% of the sample) who have an ongoing rivalry,[7] which means that the two subsamples will be vastly different. Given such clear discrepancies, informal comparisons between two subsamples can produce unreliable generalizations and insights.

[7] See **Appendix A**

Figure 2 demonstrates the AME of ongoing rivalry on MID probability. Due to the complexity of the three-way interaction, I employ a contour plot to visualize the difference of conflict probability between rival and non-rival targets. The contour plot utilizes color and surfaces to better visualize the interaction between two continuous variables and a categorical variable. In each contour plot, the two axes represent two continuous variables, and each segment of the plot surface corresponds to a different interval of the average marginal effects of ongoing rivalry on MID probability. Darker segments of the plot reflect higher probabilities of MID initiation against the rival (as opposed to non-rival targets).



A detailed interpretation of the contour plot is warranted. If we fix the level of ethnic exclusion to lower values (between 0 and 0.2 of the population), it can be observed that the probability of ongoing rivals being targeted (compared to non-rivals) decreases from 0.0225 to under 0.015 as mass unrest increases to 35 events. Even though rivals are always the preferred target over non-rivals (given marginal effects are always positive), the result suggests that as a state's ethnic exclusion is low or non-existent, the state's tendency to target rivals (compared to non-rivals) declines as mass unrest increases.

Similarly, when a state experiences the lowest level of mass unrest (0 – 5 events), the probability of MID initiation against a rival target (as opposed to a non-rival) decreases from over 0.02 (when ethnic exclusion is 0) to under 0.015 (as ethnic exclusion in state A increases 0.8). Nevertheless, as the level of mass unrest increases, interesting patterns emerge. For example, if a state's excluded ethnic groups make up 0.3 of its population, that state's MID probability against an international rival is between 0.0175 and 0.02 when there are fewer than 10 events. But if that state faces over 10 events of mass unrest that year, the probability of MID initiation against a rival increases to between 0.02 and 0.0225. Similarly, as the level of ethnic exclusion and mass unrest increases, the AME of ongoing rivalry also increases. At the most severe level of ethnic inequality (0.8) and domestic turmoil (35), the AME of ongoing rivalry on MID initiation increases to 0.045. This number doubles the MID probability when a state has zero ethnic exclusion and no mass unrest (0.02 to 0.0225) and more than triples MID initiation probability when a state only must deal with either severe ethnic inequality or mass unrest (0.0135 – 0.015).

Together, these results suggest that as the state faces either of the problems (ethnic exclusion or domestic turmoil), the state's preference for rival targets decreases. However, as both problems become increasingly severe, states are more likely to not only start international conflicts but also see ongoing rivals as attractive targets for such diversions. The plot also shows that an ethnic exclusion level of 0.25+ and a domestic turmoil level of 10+ incidents appear to be major breaks that mark where states turn more belligerent, especially against their ongoing rival(s). These findings provide support for hypothesis 2.

Taking Into Account Ethnic Kinship in Rivals

To test hypothesis 3, I incorporate information about transborder ethnic kinship into the rivalry via a three-way interaction term between ethnic exclusion, mass unrest, and the ethnic-ties-

in-rival variable. In other words, instead of a binary variable for rivalry, I include an ordinal categorical variable in the three-way interaction. This variable takes a value of 0 when the potential target is not a rival of the home state, a value of 1 when the target is a rival but does not marginalize the home state's EGIP, and a value of 2 when a target is a rival who also marginalizes the home state's EGIP(s).

Table 2 shows the model that includes a three-way interaction for hypothesis 3. Given that the rival-ethnic kin variable has 3 categories, I estimated the same model but in two different ways: one where the baseline category comprises of non-rival targets (0) and the other where the baseline is other rivals who do *not* marginalize state A's EGIPs (1). This setup allows me to conduct a dual comparison between the probability of MID against rivals who marginalize state A's EGIPs and that of categories 0 (non-rivals) and 1 (other rivals). Through these comparisons, I can examine not only the effect of each rival type (based on their ethnic ties with the home states) compared to the non-rivals but also the effect of ethnic ties within the subsample of rivals.

Table 2. Logistic Regression with Three-Way Interaction

	Model 3A Baseline: Non-Rival	Model 3B Baseline: Other Rivals
DV: MID Initiation		
Ethnic Exclusion	0.512***	-0.170
	(0.197)	(0.259)
Mass Unrest	-0.001	-0.009
	(0.008)	(0.015)
Ethnic Exclusion * Mass Unrest	0.039**	0.052
	(0.019)	(0.043)
Non-Rival	___	-1.340***
		(0.145)
Rival (Other)	1.340***	___
	(0.145)	
Rival (EGIPA Marginalized)	1.633***	0.293
	(0.221)	(0.216)
Non-Rival * Exclusion	___	0.683**
		(0.316)

Non-Rival * Unrest	___	0.008
		(0.017)
Rival (Other) * Exclusion	-0.683**	___
	(0.316)	
Rival (Other) * Unrest	-0.008	___
	(0.017)	
Rival (EGIPA Marginalized) * Exclusion	-0.903*	-0.221
	(0.541)	(0.560)
Rival (EGIPA Marginalized) * Unrest	-0.066**	-0.058*
	(0.027)	(0.030)
Non-Rival * Exclusion * Unrest	___	-0.012
		(0.047)
Rival (Other) * Exclusion * Unrest	0.012	___
	(0.047)	
Rival (EGIPA Marginalized) * Exclusion * Unrest	0.435***	0.423***
	(0.095)	(0.102)
Eth. Frac.	-0.007	-0.007
	(0.162)	(0.162)
Side A's Relative Capabilities	0.483***	0.483***
	(0.110)	(0.110)
Dyad's Trade Volume	0.000*	0.000*
	(0.000)	(0.000)
FP Similarity	-1.440***	-1.440***
	(0.180)	(0.180)
Polity Score A	-0.023***	-0.023***
	(0.006)	(0.006)
Polity Score B	0.010*	0.010*
	(0.006)	(0.006)
Minimum Distance	-0.000***	-0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Peace Years	-0.283***	-0.283***
	(0.018)	(0.018)
Peace Years^2	0.010***	0.010***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Peace Years^3	-0.000***	-0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Constant	-1.794***	-0.454**
	(0.198)	(0.205)
N	112241	112241
N Dyads	2846	2846
Log-likelihood	-5702.547	-5702.547
Pseudo R^2	0.2208	0.221
χ^2	2928.01	2928.01

Clustered (dyad-level) standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The visualization in figures 3A and 3B reconfirms that rivals (in general) are the preferred targets compared to non-rivals. Figure 3A shows a similar pattern to figure 2, suggesting that ethnically exclusive states (state A) who are also experiencing mass unrest prefer to initiate MIDs against rivals, even those who do not marginalize (or do not have ties with) the home state's EGIPs. However, figure 3B reveals a much stronger tendency of states to specifically target rivals who marginalize the home state's kin, with the probability of MID initiation increasing up to 0.96 (compared to 0.035 for rivals who do not exclude state A's EGIPs!).

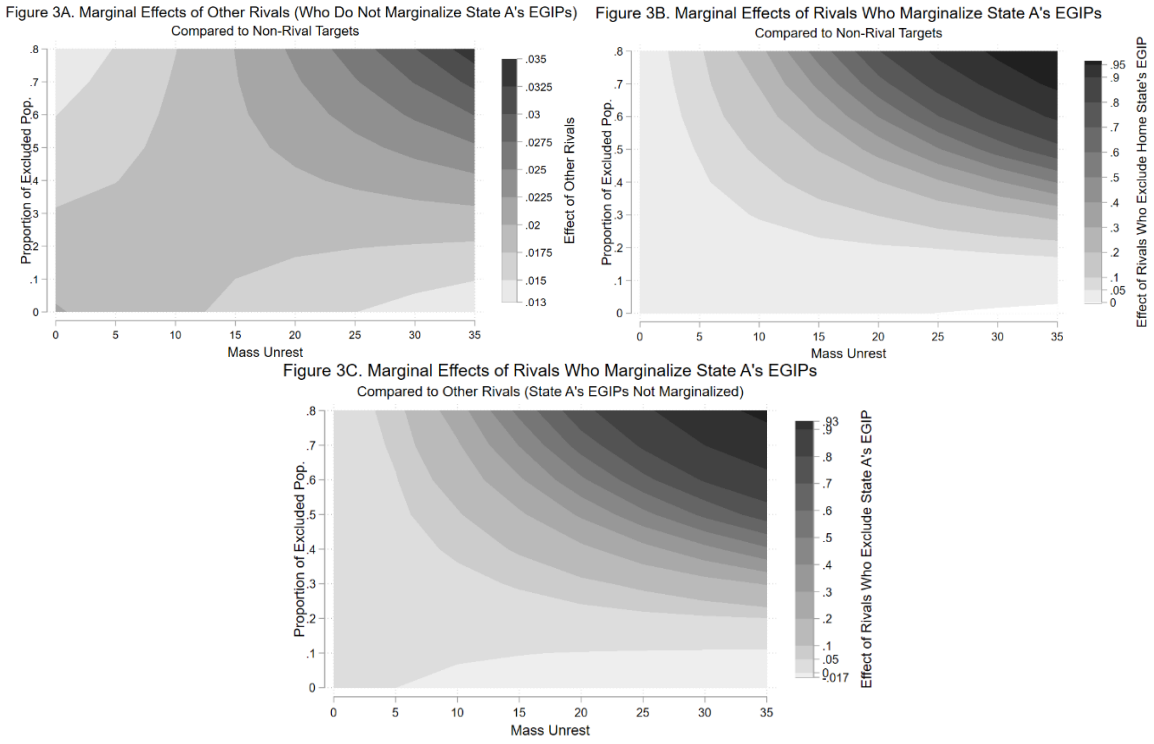


Figure 3C shows a strong tendency of ethnically exclusive home states to respond to domestic unrest by attacking rivals who marginalize the home state's EGIPs. Specifically, as both ethnic political exclusion and mass unrest increase, states a much more likely to initiate MIDs against rivals where the home states' EGIP are powerless (compared to other rivals who do not marginalize the home states' EGIPs). This evidence supports hypothesis 3 that, there more

ethnically exclusive a state is, the more leaders' survival depends on their co-ethnic members. When facing domestic turmoil, such elites are most likely to initiate diversionary conflict against targets that can ensure the highest rally effect for co-ethnic audiences.

Discussion & Conclusion

Overall, the study sets out to address an important and interesting gap in the literature of ethnicity-conflict and diversionary conflict: the role of ethnic power hierarchy in the leaders' decision to use diversionary force. Specifically, I argue that countries with high levels of ethnic political inequality (measured by size of excluded ethnic population) generate two parallel patterns that increase the potential for instability. One the one hand, exclusion (of large ethnic groups) from the political system means that state elites become increasingly reliant on the support of a narrow coalition of their own ethnic group(s). In addition, political inequality also enables members of ethnic groups in power (EGIPs) to develop an increased sense of ethnic nationalism. On the other hand, for members of the excluded ethnic groups (EGEs), the lack of access to state power and resources produces underlying grievances and potential for domestic conflict (especially if these groups are large in size). Together, these factors shape state elites' calculus for political survival: to maintain power, the leadership needs to appease their co-ethnics (sometimes by nationalist policies if necessary), while keeping the latent threats of the EGEs at bay.

Domestic turmoil, particularly mass unrest, can threaten to upset this delicate balance. But leaders of ethnically exclusive states do not have many effective options to respond to such crises. When larger shares of ethnic population are excluded from state power and resources, states may not have enough resources, capacity, and willingness to accommodate citizens (whether the opposition represents factions of the EGIPs or the marginalized groups). Large-scale and

prolonged repression are either politically costly or logistically difficult. These make diversionary conflict an even more attractive option.

The utility of diversionary conflict is even higher if there exist targets that (1) offer leaders the opportunity and justification for the conflict and (2) create the largest rallying effect among members of the EGIPs to help leaders stay in power. Given the hostile history between rivals, ongoing international rivalries may provide opportunities for ethnically exclusive states to escalate existing tensions into militarized conflicts. In addition, I expect that the most attractive target are rivals who also marginalize the home state's EGIPs. Such targets allow home state leaders to frame the conflict as an effort to rescue and reunite ethnic kins and reclaim the homeland, thereby creating an even larger rallying effect among co-ethnic supporters at home.

Statistical evidence aligns with these theoretical expectations. Particularly, data analyses support the first hypothesis that states with higher ethnic inequality are more likely to initiate MIDs in response to high levels of mass unrest. Evidence also shows that these states are considerably more likely to start disputes with international rivals as mass unrest increases. However, while all types of rivals are preferred over non-rivals, those rivals who marginalize the kin of home state's ethnic groups in power are much more likely to be targeted.

These findings contribute to previous research in both diversionary conflict and irredentism. First, this study shows that ethnic political inequality is an important domestic condition when examining a state's motivation for diversion. Moreover, while previous research found that ethnic diversity and ethnic mobilization increase states' propensity to international conflict (Haynes 2016; Lake and Rothchild 1998; Trumbore 2003), how such diversity leads to domestic instability and violence – as well as external diversionary behavior – remains unexplored. Borrowing insights from ethnicity-civil conflict research, this paper turns the attention to the nature

of ethnic cleavage. The study shows that political inequality, when it overlaps with existing ethnic lines, can create heightened nationalist sentiments (among groups in power) and deep-seated grievances (among excluded groups) – both of which fuels ethnic tensions and structural constraints that motivate the state's diversionary behavior.

Second, the findings also add to the literature on nationalism, irredentism and international conflict. The findings align with previous studies that the dominance of one or a few ethnic groups over others enables nationalist sentiments that shape a state's international behavior. When a state excludes a high proportion of ethnic others from power, the leader's political survival becomes dependent on a narrow ethnic coalition with strong nationalist attachment, incentivizing the leader to gain the selectorate's support using nationalist foreign policies (Saideman and Ayres 2008; Goemans and Schultz 2017). This study also shows that transborder ethnic groups (especially in a rival state) provides an ideal opportunity for diversionary conflict – leading to the so-called Macedonian Syndrome where states initiate territorial conflicts claiming to rescue ethnic kins from marginalization or reclaim the "homeland" (Cederman et al. 2025; Saideman and Ayres 2008)

However, while a nationalist selectorate only increases the leader's incentive for appearing nationalist, it does not always lead to conflict. By showing that domestic crises can trigger leaders of highly ethnically exclusive states into using diversionary force, this paper contributes to the literature by clarifying one pathway from political inequality to nationalism and eventually to international conflict.

Third, this study also adds to the body of research on horizontal inequality and its consequences. Previous studies have shown that horizontal inequality (HI) – especially ethnic inequality – has various negative impacts including conflict (Cederman et al. 2011; Stewart 2008), low public good provision (Baldwin and Huber 2010), and underdevelopment (Alesina et al.

2016). This study's findings point to international conflict as another potential consequence of ethnic (political) inequality.

Limitations and Extensions

Despite the interesting findings, this study is not without limitations. The scope of this paper is fixed on how ethnic inequality influences the state's propensity for *international* conflict. While this focus allows me to have a more in-depth examination of international diversionary conflict, there are other options for the state to respond to internal issues – the most notable of which being repression and accommodation. My theory predicts that repression and/or accommodation are not enough to deal with the problems posed by inequality and domestic turmoil (and thus makes leaders turning to diversion). As such, future work is necessary to explore the substitution or complement between accommodation, repression, and diversion – and how ethnic inequality shape the tradeoffs or supplementation of these policy options. Such analyses will not only be interesting but also important to find further evidence to support (or refute) my argument.

In addition, this study's focal point lies in state leaders' diversionary behavior when ethnic political inequality interacts with political instability. Thus, other problems like economic struggles or natural disaster shocks remain largely outside of the main scope, despite potentially being important triggers for diversionary conflict (Mitchell and Prins 2004; Wiegand 2018; Lee et al. 2022). In fact, economic struggles are perhaps an underlying source of political threats such as mass unrest and low public approval (Oakes 2006).

To further explore this, I examined the effect of ethnic political inequality on MID initiation when states also experience high *inflation* in appendix E. Overall, results are mixed and differ considerably from the main findings. While the two-way interaction between ethnic exclusion and

inflation is not statistically significant, models with three-way interactions show that states are most likely to divert against rivals (especially rivals who marginalize their ethnic kin) when they have (1) high inflation and (2) *low* ethnic exclusion.

Given the problem of data missingness for inflation data, these results should be interpreted with caution. Yet, as they are, these findings suggest that economic problems may motivate diversionary conflict, but only for less exclusive states. Research on diversionary conflict in democracies may offer an explanation. Similar to democratic states, leaders of more ethnically inclusive states are beholden to broader domestic audiences and thus face more pressure from economic problems – given how economic downturns can impact a large number of citizens (Gelpi 1997; Kisangani and Pickering 2009; Long and Pickering 2022). The interplay between ethnic inequality, regime openness, and economic and other types of issues will be an interesting future research avenue.

Finally, despite my focus on ethnic political inequality, other aspects of HI may also cause international violence. In appendix F, I examined the effects of economic inequality on diversionary conflict using the group Gini index, adopted from Mancini et al. (2008), of nightlight data from the EPR data set. Overall, ethnic economic inequality's effect on international conflict is (mostly) similar to that of ethnic political inequality. Yet, the effect is not robust: I only find significant effect of economic inequality in models with three-way interaction terms, which may be driven by the strong effect of rivalry. In addition, on its own, horizontal economic inequality appears to have no independent effect on MID initiation. Despite this inconsistency, such patterns suggest that economic inequality among ethnic groups can lead to external diversion – just as it does with civil war. More research should be done in the future to explore how various aspects of horizontal inequality – political, economic, and social – influence states' propensity for diversion.

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