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The Geopolitics of Major Power Interventions in Civil Wars

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Abstract

What factors influence third parties to intervene in civil wars? Our focus on major powers, which are disproportionately more likely than other states to intervene in civil conflicts, directs us to the factors that uniquely shape their interests. While our study does not rule out humanitarian interventions by collective security international institutions and individual states, we do not find that humanitarian concerns motivate major powers. We argue and demonstrate that their decisions to intervene are principally motivated by their drive to establish, consolidate, or expand influence in different geopolitical regions. Past research with the strategic approach stressed the importance of an intervener's prior ties with a civil war state for this decision. Though important, we show the effect of these ties is subordinate to other factors. In our argument, their role is primarily relevant for determining whether an intervener will be on the side of the government or opposition. The key issue of whether major powers are likely to intervene in the first place, however, is contingent on how much the entire region is strategically relevant to warrant intervention. The empirical analysis of civil war interventions over nearly fifty years lends strong support to our theoretical expectations.

Keywords

civil war, third-party interventions, major powers, geopolitics

There is a long tradition of military interventions in civil wars despite constituting the *de jure* interference in another state's internal affairs. In fact, these are increasingly sanctioned and carried out by collective security institutions, principally through the United Nations (UN). Unsurprisingly then, the research in this area has been steadily growing, attracting attention to a range of questions from their principal motivations to the effects on the duration, outcome, and recurrence. Our study addresses the issue of when, why, and on which side major powers choose to intervene in civil wars. Since they have been more frequent interveners than any other states (Findley and Teo 2006, 836; Gent 2007; Regan 1996, 345), it is an important subset of civil war interventions.

If we look at more recent events, there are several puzzling trends. Why, for instance, has the United States taken a strong stance condemning the Russian intervention in Ukraine rather than a firm military position, let alone preempting it with military action? At the same time, despite the Russian armed support for the Assad government in Syria, on more than one occasion the United States launched strikes against the Assad forces. Why did the United States, jointly with the European powers, militarily act in Libya, yet Russia stayed on the sidelines? In each instance, the official reasons for interventions were defended on normative grounds, ranging from the right to self-determination (Russian nationalities in the eastern Ukraine), supporting the uprising against a dictator (the U.S. and European coalition in Libya), suspected use of chemical weapons against civilians (U.S. strikes in Syria) to defending the regime from "radical" and "terrorist" insurgents (Russian strikes in Syria).

Our argument rests on the premise that, despite their official justifications, such interventions are driven by strategic interests rather than humanitarian concerns.[1] In our view, major power incentives for interfering in other states' internal affairs are uniquely shaped by geopolitical considerations. Since they have both the abilities and ambitions to project their presence beyond their immediate surroundings, one of their defining policies is to seek opportunities to consolidate and expand their influence in different areas around the world. Domestic instability in another state presents itself as such an opportunity.

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Given that wars are costlier than other methods of interference (economic sanctions, military aid, or diplomatic maneuvering), it is critical for the situation to be of high stakes if the outside power were to choose militarized options. The heart of our argument is that a major power's decision to intervene is primarily dependent on the civil war state's geostrategic location. More precisely, we find the motivations at the intersection between the relevance of the entire region and the civil war state itself, with these two geopolitical components figuring differently in the causal mechanism. A major power is likely to intervene only if a civil war state is located in a strategically relevant region. Given this regional incentive for intervention, its established ties with the state determine whether it will attempt to influence the outcome by supporting the government or opposition. To the best of our knowledge, no other work rigorously explores civil war interventions from this angle.

The Extant Research

While there is a substantial literature about the effects of military interventions on the duration, outcomes, and long-term consequences of intrastate conflicts (Balch-Lindsay and Enterline 2000; Linebarger and Enterline 2016; Pickering and Kisangani 2006; Regan 2002), explorations into their causes are comparatively limited.[2] Albeit small, the scholarship is nonetheless divided on the issue of whether strategic or humanitarian motivations drive military interventions. Most studies ascribe strategic interests to the particular attributes of the civil war state or an intervener's ties to it. The most explored elements in their relationship concern their alliance status, colonial ties, mutual trade, and ethnic affinities (Findley and Teo 2006; Lemke and Regan 2004; Rost and Greig 2011; Saideman 1997; Stojek and Chacha 2015). As for relevant characteristics of the civil war state itself, its geographic location in terms of contiguity and its natural resources, especially oil, drew the greatest attention (Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Kathman 2011; Rost and Greig 2011). Another line of research looks at rivalry between potential interveners, framing decisions to act militarily as a function of their divergent or congruent interests in the state undergoing domestic turmoil (Findley and Teo 2006; Gent 2007).

While these are important advances in our understanding of strategic motivations to interfere in intrastate conflicts, there are still critical issues that invite further research. Among them is the geopolitics of a larger regional setting, which has not been sufficiently explored except for a few studies about the danger of contagion, either as a result of transnational aspects of the civil conflict itself (Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Gleditsch 2007) or as a neighboring state's incentive to prevent its spillover (Rost and Greig 2011). For the most part, however, the regional factor has not been integrated, theoretically or empirically, in the explanations for interventions. Kathman's (2011) analysis is a rare exception in connecting the importance of neighboring states, though not the entire geopolitical region *per se*, to an outside state's motivation to prevent conflict spillover.

This issue is especially relevant for major power interveners because, by definition, their strategic considerations are of a wider geopolitical scope than more narrowly defined individual ties to the civil war state. These are better known as "spheres of interest" or "spheres of influence," a phrase that raises understandable moral unease given their very nature as a direct or indirect form of control over foreign lands. Nonetheless, it is not only one of the operating principles in major power politics, but this notion also figures prominently in several realist narratives about major power behavior (Gilpin 1981; Krasner 1999; Mearsheimer 2001), as well as works by diplomatic historians (e.g., Gardner 1993; Taylor 1954), albeit not subject to analytical rigor. The exceptions are rare such as Danilovic's (2002) quantitative analysis of the competing geopolitical interests in the history of major power deterrence. More recently, Hast (2014) offered a normative reconceptualization through the English School framework, and Etzioni (2015) finds their continued relevance from the realist angle as a possible "exit" solution to the "Thucydides trap." Nonetheless, similar to Hast and Danilovic, Etzioni points to slim if any theoretical and conceptual foundations to build upon, as "a review of the international relations literature on SOI [spheres of influence] reveals the dearth of existing research" (118). It is then an odd research gap that, despite a received view that "spheres of interest" matter in major power politics, there is hardly any record in their analytically and methodologically rigorous treatment.

There is, therefore, a lacuna in the rigorous treatment of both the "spheres of influence" politics and major power interventions in civil wars. We address it by probing the extent to which interfering in domestic conflicts serves major powers as a foreign policy tool to establish, preserve, or expand their larger geopolitical influences. By contrast, previous studies conceived interventions (by any country) as opportunities to influence the particular state undergoing conflict (Grigoryan 2010; Lemke and Regan 2004; Regan 2002) or preventing their spread into neighboring states (Gleditsch 2007; Kathman 2011; Rost and Greig 2011) rather than to preserve or change the balance of geopolitical influence in the region in which that state is situated. Our argument is that while the focus on influencing individual states might indeed be critical for general interveners, regional geopolitics plays a much greater role for major powers. It develops a new angle to

examine the regional context for civil war interventions that extends beyond contagion motivations.

Besides the principal motivations for the decision to act militarily, another aspect concerns the choice of sides, that is, whether to support the government or opposition. The scholarly attention to this issue is relatively modest, primarily examining its effect on the conflict outcome (e.g., Grigoryan 2010), although Findley and Teo (2006), for example, also include it in their theoretical model of a third party's decision. We show it is critical to integrate an intervener's choice of warring sides to fully understand the strategic calculus behind its decision whether to intervene at all. Our theoretical framework then allows us to specify several interlinked questions, that is, whether, why, and which civil war side will get support. As such, it is motivated to contribute to this growing and innovative line of research from the last two decades.

Although they do not speak to what constitutes the main strategic reasons for interventions, we should mention another important group of studies with the focus on normative and moral considerations. The argument is that humanitarian concerns are increasingly motivating military interventions (Finnemore 2003; Weiss 2001; Western 2002), though with a caveat that "without multilateralism, claims of humanitarian motivation and justification are suspect" (Finnemore 2003, 73). Consequently, this research is primarily oriented toward multilateral and UN-sanctioned responses to humanitarian crises. Yet, some still focus on interventions by individual states to explore possible humanitarian concerns, such as responses to high casualty rates or refugee crises in civil wars, either reaching mixed conclusions (Findley and Teo 2006) or not finding evidence that humanitarian motives prevail over "realpolitik" interests (Pearson, Baumann, and Pickering 1994). Alternatively, the flaming rhetorical charges about ethnic and other atrocities, alleged or real, can be used as an intervener's bargaining strategy to obfuscate its actual strategic motives for intervention (Grigoryan 2010). Our principal premise is that strategic ("realpolitik") interests prevail in such decisions, but we will also test for possible humanitarian incentives as an alternative explanation.

Theoretical Premise and Hypotheses

We first address the issue of which civil wars are more likely to experience major power interventions. As we discussed, we do not look at the particular attributes of the civil war country or its internal conflict in isolation from other considerations. Instead, we place the critical component of interventionist motivations in the larger geopolitical concerns in which regions are prioritized according to their strategic relevance. Civil wars give the opportunity to establish, consolidate, or expand the intervener's influence in a region of interest.[3]

Second, given that individual ties with countries in any region are not uniformly the same, a major power would have an incentive to intervene even in a country with which it does not have strongly established relations. In this case, we anticipate the intervention if it is situated in the geopolitical area of greater weight for that power. This expectation departs from the past research that primarily considered strong individual ties to form the motives for intervention.

Third, to further understand the strategic calculus for acting in countries with both weak and strong linkages to an intervener, it is essential to distinguish the sides in the internal strife. We expect a major power to aid a government with which it has established close ties to prevent its downfall. Conversely, if the prior linkages were weak, it might attempt to form new relations by supporting the rebels. Either way, if there is a geopolitical incentive to influence the outcome, the choice of the sides is determined by the strength of prior relations with the civil war state.

Our theoretical framework is best illustrated in Figure 1. It identifies variable strategic motivations for interventions under distinct combinations of an intervener's regional and state-specific interests. The intersection between the two key elements is relevant to understand their strategic choice: (1) whether a major power is likely to militarily intervene at all depends on the strategic value of the geopolitical region, and (2) what side it is likely to support is determined by the individual ties to the civil war state.[4] Our central claim is that regional geopolitics drives intervention, helping us understand why we observe a major power using force in states with which it previously had both high and low connections. The relative interests in a civil war state, in turn, influence the decision to act on the side of the government or the opposition. In this sense, the importance of the country cannot be considered in isolation from the larger geopolitical region in which it is located.

Our argument leads us to expect the strongest incentive for military interventions in the contingencies presented in the top-right and bottom-right quadrants. Both scenarios occur in critical regions. The difference is in the strength of the ties with the civil war state. In situations of strong prior influence in both the region and the state experiencing domestic turmoil (top-right quadrant), the motive is fairly straightforward. It is a matter of maintaining its strategic presence in the area ("Geopolitical Consolidation") and preserving or further consolidating its influence on the governments whose policy is aligned with an intervener. In the case of previously weak relations with an unstable state in a critically important region (bottom-right), there is the desire to solidify and expand

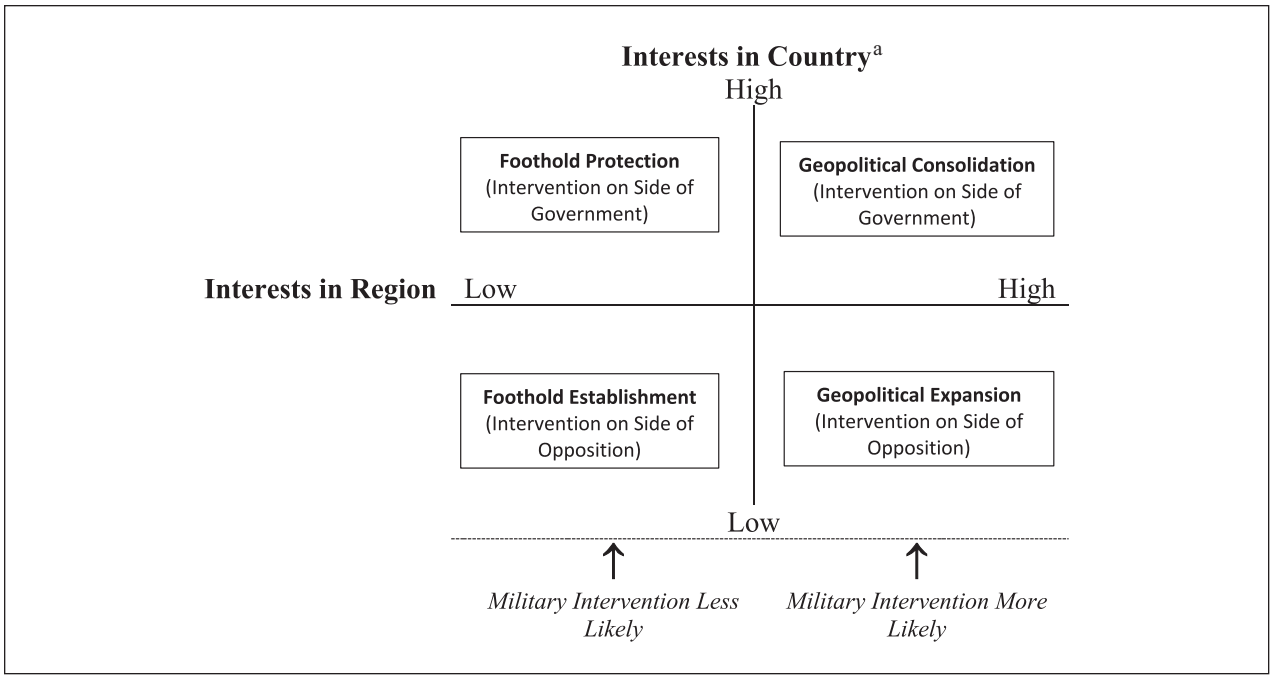

Figure 1. A typology of major power interventions.
[a]For the brevity of presentation, we use this shortcut label ("Interests in Country") for the importance of the country within the overall region for an intervener.

its regional influence ("Geopolitical Expansion"). Interventions in this case can also close a power vacuum in the civil war country opened up by its unstable conditions which could be exploited by a potential major power rival. Insurgents are then likely to be on the receiving end to increase their chances of defeating the government. In either case, the goal is to maintain or expand the established regional influence.

We do not expect the same degree of interventionist incentives in the contingencies in the top-left and bottom-left quadrants. By focusing on individual ties with the civil war state, however, the past research did not differentiate between the situations in the top two quadrants in our illustration. As previous research uniformly expected that an outside party would militarily intervene if it had strong individual ties with the civil war state (Findley and Teo 2006; Gent 2007; Lemke and Regan 2004), it would anticipate third-party military actions in the contingencies presented in the top two quadrants in our figure, that is, in the states with strong individual linkages to the intervener, whether military, economic, or through a colonial past.[5] In our framework, however, their higher frequency should be in the areas of greater (both right-side quadrants) rather than lesser (left-side) regional relevance. That is, we predict interventions even in weakly tied states *if* these are located in high-stake geopolitical regions (bottom-right). In this case, the incentive would be to support the insurgency.

While we recognize the significance of the past research in showing strategic motives for interventions, our focus on major powers as the most frequent interveners leads us to depart from this literature by recognizing the larger geopolitical context as critical for their decisions to resort to force. We consequently expect them to do it in states with which they have both strong and weak ties. Moreover, not all states of individual strategic value would warrant an intervention.

We can specify our theoretical expectations as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Major powers are more likely to intervene in civil wars occurring in the regions of greater strategic interests than those in which a power has minimal strategic stakes.
Hypothesis 2 (H2): If occurring in the region of strategic interests, a major power will intervene on the side of the government if it has strong ties with the civil war state.
Hypothesis 3 (H3): If occurring in the region of strategic interests, a major power will intervene on the side of the opposition (rebels) if it has weak ties with the civil war state.

Research Design and Data

To identify civil wars, we rely on Regan's (2002) widely used civil war data set covering the years

1945–1999. Though only the first post–Cold War decade is included, we do not find it problematic as roughly one-third of all civil war years in the data occur during this period and, as our analysis will show, controlling for the Cold War is generally statistically insignificant.[6] Regan defines a civil war as organized conflict between two or more groups within a state resulting in at least two hundred battlefield deaths. We first created a civil war year data set, with a separate observation for each ongoing year of a civil war. Then, to model a major power's decision to intervene, we created separate observations for each major power in a civil war year.[7] The unit of analysis is therefore the civil war-potential major power intervener year.

Dependent Variables

Regan's (2002) data set also identifies the third-party actor, if any, in a civil war year (*thrdpty*) and includes the military intervention variable (*military*). Our first dependent variable, *Military Intervention*, is dichotomous, coded 1 if the major power committed troops, naval forces, or air support to one side in a civil war (values of 1, 2, or 5 on Reagan's *military* variable),[8] and 0 otherwise.[9]

Our next two dependent variables capture the direction of interventions. We use the *target* variable in Regan's (2002) data set, coding whether the government or opposition received support, to generate two dichotomous variables.[10] *Government Intervention* takes a value of 1 if the major power aids the government, and 0 otherwise. Analogously, *Opposition Intervention* is coded 1 if it supports the rebels, and 0 if it does not. Due to the dichotomous nature of all three dependent variables, we estimate our models using probit with robust standard errors clustered on the dyad to correct for any possible problems of heteroscedasticity.

Independent Variables

To establish the temporal requirement for causality, all independent and control variables are lagged by one year.[11] Since our central expectation is that major power interventions in civil wars are driven by their geopolitical/regional interests and their interaction with the interests in the civil war state, we construct composite measures for both types of interests.

(1) Major power intervener's regional interests. Our measure is consistent with past attempts to capture security and economic ties in terms of alliances and trade (Danilovic 2002; Kathman 2011). Since the relevance of the entire geopolitical region, rather than the immediate neighborhood, is essential for our argument about major power interveners, we follow Danilovic's (2002) method in constructing a composite score that indicates the region's share of its overall global interest portfolio.[12] As a composite measure, it consists of a major power's (1) number of *alliances* in the region as a proportion of its total alliances, and (2) *foreign trade* with the region as a proportion of its total foreign trade.[13] We supplement this original measure with *arms transfers* as an additional military dimension of regional influence, analogously calculated as a proportion of a major power's total world arms transfers. We believe this is an important addition because it allows us to capture the importance of military *alignments*, even in the absence of formal alliance treaties.[14]

The composite measure is created in two steps. First, their composite average is calculated by adding all components (each expressed in ratios) and dividing by their total number (3). The resulting variable ranges from 0 (the major power has no geopolitical interests in the region) to 1 (all of its stakes are concentrated in a single region). We then transform this variable by coding the region in which it has the greatest interest and recalculate its interests in every other region as a percentage of this most important geopolitical area. In other words, a major power's interests in each regional area represent how important they are relative to its strategically most relevant region.[15] The resultant value for a power's interests in each region ranges from 0 to 1, with increasing values indicating its greater importance.

Our data for bilateral *foreign trade/exports* are from Gleditsch's (2002) data set. The measure of *alliance ties* is drawn from the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) (Leeds et al. 2002). We use a dichotomous measure of alliances, coded 1 if there is a formal alliance between states, and 0 otherwise. Data for *arms transfers* is generated from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.[16]

(2) Major power intervener's interests in the civil war state. This variable is constructed analogously to the potential intervener's interests in the region but now concentrating only on individual ties with the civil war country to capture its importance in the context of the major power's interests in the entire geopolitical region where the civil war takes place. It therefore consists of the same three components, that is, a major power's *alliance ties, arms transfers*, and *foreign trade* with the civil war state, each calculated as a share of that major power's total interests in the region in which the civil war state is located. The composite score is then constructed as done for the measure of regional interests. It ranges from 0 (a major power has no ties to the country) to 1 (indicating the country of greatest importance for the potential intervener relative to other regional states).

(3) Interaction of major power's regional and country interests. As laid out in our theoretical discussion, the geopolitical/regional interests define the major power's stakes in the civil war, critically influencing its decision to intervene. Conditional on this principal motivation for intervention, the power's individual ties with the civil war country shape its choice of the combating sides. Consequently, we include the interaction of the major power's *Regional Interests* and *Country Interests* for identifying which side will be aided. Note that when the interaction is included in the model, the interpretation of the lower order coefficients must also be conditional. That is, the coefficient for the *Major Power's Regional Interests* is interpreted as the effect of increasing regional interests while the ties with the civil war country are negligent. The coefficient for the *Major Power's Interests in the Country* indicates the effect of increasing its interests in the civil war state located in the region of no strategic importance. The interaction variable then gives the change in effect for each lower order variable as the other increases by one unit. Given the difficulty in interpreting the coefficients of an interaction term (and its constituent parts), we generate graphs of the predicted probabilities to facilitate a more accessible interpretation of the findings.

Control Variables

We control for factors that can alternatively explain civil war interventions, generally falling into four categories: (1) the interests of all other major powers in the region and country of civil conflict to account for possible geopolitical competition over their influence with the intervener, (2) alternative measures for the potential intervener's ties with the civil war state, (3) attributes of the civil war state, and (4) characteristics of the civil war.[17]

To control for the possible rivalry with other powers over the region and/or state in dispute, we include the *Regional Interests-Other Major Powers* and *Country Interests-Other Major Powers* variables, which estimate the mean value of geopolitical interests in the civil war region and country, respectively, for all other major powers. The same three components used to measure the intervener's regional interests are used for all other powers as well, with the equivalent calculating procedure. Both variables range from 0 to 1. Higher values indicate a greater average of involved stakes by other powers in the region and/or country in which the civil war occurs. These variables also allow us to account for the possibility that an intervener's decision can be contingent on the strategic interests of potential rival interveners (Danilovic 2002; Krasner 1999). This could be a relevant factor as astutely examined in a few other studies on interventions (Findley and Teo 2006; Gent 2007), though their approach to strategic interests is strictly in terms of the individual ties with the civil war state.[18]

For the other types of individual ties, we control for the *UN Voting Similarity, Alliance Portfolio Similarity*, and *Former Colonial Ties*. It could be expected that stronger similarity and/or ties should increase the likelihood of intervening on the side of the government. Using Voeten's (2013) data, *UN Voting Similarity* is a continuous variable ranging from −1 (the opposite voting positions) to +1 (identical votes). *Alliance Portfolio Similarity* is based on Signorino and Ritter's (1999) *S*-score. It also ranges from −1 to +1, with higher values indicating that the major power shares a greater number of common allies with the civil war state. *Former Colonial Ties* are constructed from Hensel's (2014) Colonial History data set and coded dichotomously, with 1 indicating former colonial ties.

We use standard control variables for the characteristics of the civil war state, including overall national capabilities, level of economic development, and political regime type. The Composite Indicator of National Capabilities (CINC) (Singer 1987) measures the civil war state's general power (*Capabilities*), *GDP per Capita* for its economic development is based on Gleditsch's (2002) Expanded Trade and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) data set, and the Polity2 variable from the Polity4 data set (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2017) identifies its *Regime Type*. Since democracies are generally more respectful of human rights, this variable can also indicate possible humanitarian motivations for interfering in domestic wars.

Our final set of control variables accounts for the characteristics of the civil war itself. As an indicator of humanitarian motives, we include *Refugees* as a dichotomous variable for civil wars with at least 50,000 refugees, using Stojek and Chacha's (2015) expanded version of Regan's (2002) original data. As identified in Regan's (2002) data, the aim of *Ideological Conflict* is to overthrow the ruling political/economic ideology, while the opposing sides in *Religious Conflict* are predominantly organized around religious identities. Finally, we control for *Cold War* with the value of 1 for the 1945–1989 period, and 0 afterward.

To address the potential problem of temporal dependence, we follow the standard procedure suggested by Carter and Signorino (2010) and include a cubic polynomial of the number of years since a major power last intervened in a civil war—*Years Since Last Intervention*, as well as the squared and cubed versions of this variable.

Empirical Analysis

For a better sense of the empirical trends in major power interventions in civil wars, Table 1 shows the number of civil wars (first column) and civil war years for major

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Major Power Interventions in Civil Wars.

	Civil wars	Civil war years
Major power interventions	48	106
	(32.00)	(1.85)
Support for government	37	80
Support for opposition	11	26
Non–major power interventions[a]	29	78
	(19.33)	(1.36)
No intervention	73	5,555
	(48.67)	(96.79)
Total	150	5,739
	(100.00%)	(100.00%)

[a]Interventions in which major powers did not participate.

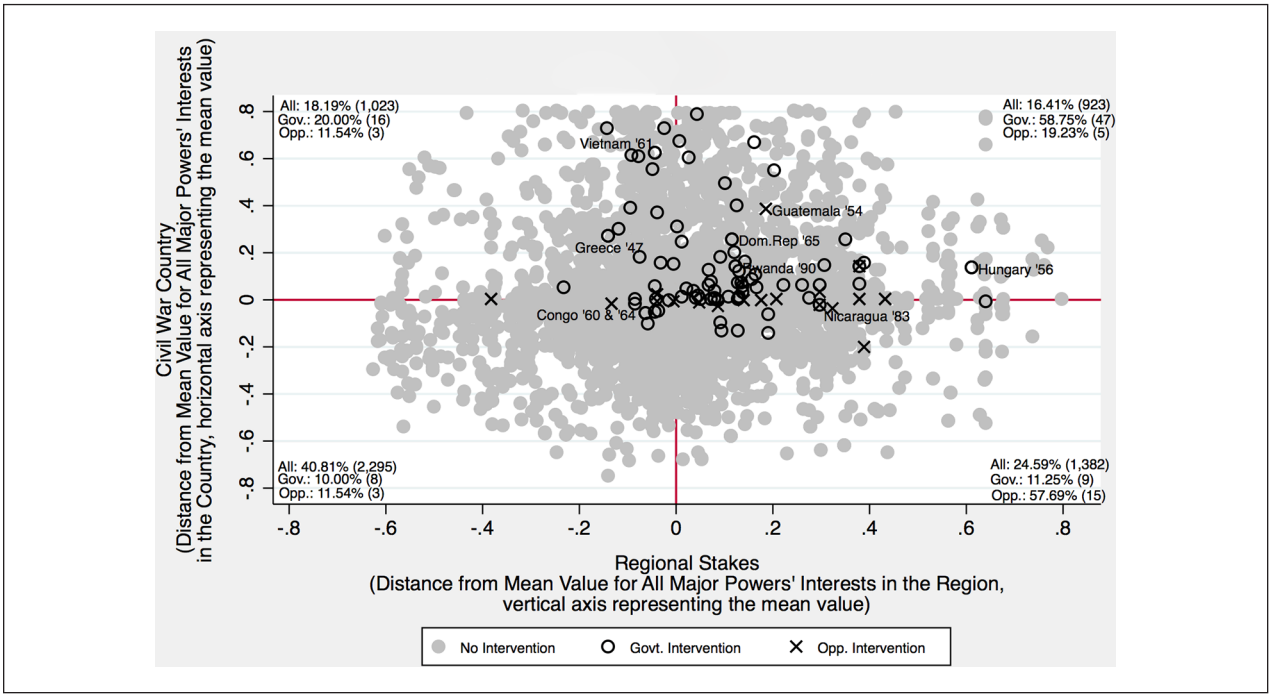

Figure 2. Distribution of civil war years and major power interventions.
The labeled cases are a sample of illustrations discussed in the text.

powers as potential interveners (second column). There were 150 civil wars during the entire period, one-half (77) experienced outside interventions and nearly one-third (48) by the five major powers (the remaining twenty-nine interventions were by other states). The major powers in our analysis therefore account for 63 percent of all civil war interventions in Regan's data, confirming what was suggested in other studies (Findley and Teo 2006; Gent 2007; Regan 1996) that they are the most frequent interveners and lending validity to a closer look at their interventionist behavior. Over three-quarters of these were on the government's side and close to one-quarter on the opposition side.

For a descriptive illustration of our theoretical framework, Figure 2 reproduces the four quadrants in Figure 1 with the actual distribution of civil war years and major power interventions. Each observation in the graph represents the distance between a potential intervener's interests and the annual mean value for all other major powers' interests in the civil war state and region. Cases falling directly on either axis indicate that a potential or actual intervener's interests are the same as the average of all other major powers. Observations to the right (left) of the vertical axis then show whether a major power has stronger (weaker) regional stakes compared to the other major powers, whereas those above (below) the horizontal axis

show its greater (lesser) interests in the country than the rest. In this way, we show not only the intensity of interests of each potential great power intervener but, through comparison to the interests of all other powers, also capture the degree of major power competition in the geopolitical region or country. In each quadrant, we list the total number and percentage of all civil war years and analogously for interventions aiding the government (G) and opposition (O).

First to note is that the largest number of civil wars without major power interventions (40%) were in countries and regions where they had no major stakes (bottom-left). Another main point about this scatterplot is that it helps visually discern the opportunities for interventions, that is, the civil wars themselves. Fewer civil wars occurred in the upper-right quadrant, exactly where we find most interventions on the side of the government. Out of eighty civil war years with pro-government interventions, the greatest number (58.8%) took place in the areas of strong bonds with the civil war region and the state itself (upper-right). Those in support of the opposition occurred most frequently in the high-stake region but with less than average ties to the civil war state (57.7% of pro-rebel interventions). These are the most distinctive patterns that are directly consistent with our expectations in Hypotheses 2 and 3, also presented in the corresponding quadrants ("Consolidation" and "Expansion") of Figure 1 in our theoretical discussion.

A few case illustrations would also help at this point. In 1956, while Soviet troops crushed the Hungarian uprising, the Western powers protested but *de facto* stayed on the sidelines. This scenario was repeated in subsequent Eastern European turmoils, showing that at least tacitly, if not overtly, other powers recognized Soviet vital interests in this region. Acting in terms of "spheres of influence" has not been unique to Russia or any other particular power. Even the United States, where the official and academic aversion to this notion seems more pronounced than elsewhere, has been interventionist in the vital areas for its security but refrained from acting on the periphery of its interests. It remained on the sidelines not only in the Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe but also in cases of genocide such as Rwanda in the 1990s where only one major power militarily intervened, France. While there were indeed urgent humanitarian needs to act, we believe it was also not coincidental that France had the highest composite score of strategic stakes in the region (Africa) and civil war state (Rwanda) at the time. On the other hand, the United States intervened several times in Central and South America throughout the Cold War, reflecting the historical continuity with the Munroe Doctrine. A sample, highlighted on our scatterplot, includes propping up the government in the Dominican Republic (1965) and supporting the opposition in Nicaragua (1983). In both cases, the United States had the highest regional stakes of all powers (Hypothesis 1), whereas ties to the governments, or their lack of, explained which side it supported, consistent with our argument (H2 and H3).

We examined a few outlier cases, albeit rare as we anticipated (H1), that fall into the areas we designated as "Foothold Protection" and "Foothold Establishment" in Figure 1. While our framework does not rule out such interventions, their frequency should be significantly lower than in the areas of "Geopolitical Consolidation" and "Geopolitical Expansion." The case distributions in Figure 2 confirm this pattern. They can still be interesting for revealing potential lines for future research.

Common to all four illustrative "foothold-type" of cases (see Figures 1 and 2), United States in Greece (1947) and Vietnam (1961) and the Soviets in Congo (1960, 1964), is the abrupt power vacuum among major powers in the respective locations (the aftermath of World War II [WWII] in Southeastern Europe, the withdrawal of French colonists from Southeast Asia, and the independence of resource-rich Nigeria in 1960). Another notable aspect is that not all rebels threatened the interests of a major power linked to their government. A series of civil strife cases in Guatemala can be illustrative. The United States did not intervene to aid the pro-U.S. government in 1944 (not shown in Figure 2 as it was outside the time scope in the data) because an internally divisive issue was not critical for its policy. In 1954, it militarily assisted the rebels, on its surface inconsistent with our expectations (see Figure 2), but a closer look shows that their policies would be even more closely aligned with the U.S. interests than those of the current government. Finally, there was a pro-government intervention in 1966 that fits our model, but the same can be said even for 1944 and 1954 despite their seeming inconsistency due to the crudeness of large quantitative data sets. There is evidently a need for comparative case studies that can uncover such swift internal shifts in a very short time span with a fine-grained analysis of the policy platforms of various warring sides. All the same, these are a minority of cases, mostly "foothold-type" attempts.

For a more robust statistical analysis of the motivations behind major power interventions, we turn to the multivariate models in Table 2. The first column in Table 2 reports the results from the general model of their interventions regardless of which side it supports. Our expectation in Hypothesis 1 is that geopolitical regional interests are the primary factor motivating this decision. The positive and statistically significant coefficient for the variable *Regional Interests-Potential Intervener* indicates that this is indeed the case. There is also a positive and statistically significant effect for the major power's interests in the country. Since we anticipate that the

Table 2. Major Power Interests and Intervention in Civil Wars.

	All interventions	Intervention on government side	Intervention on opposition side
Major power interests			
Regional Interests-Potential Intervener	1.141***	1.221***	1.182***
	(0.290)	(0.293)	(0.453)
Country Interests-Potential Intervener	0.567**	0.722**	−0.035
	(0.233)	(0.343)	(0.620)
Regional Interests × Country Interests	—	0.173	−1.091
		(0.888)	(1.034)
Regional Interests-Other Major Powers	−1.646***	−2.509***	−0.070
	(0.604)	(0.815)	(0.662)
Country Interests-Other Major Powers	−1.988***	−1.334	−3.779*
	(0.793)	(0.793)	(2.158)
Other ties between civil war state and major power			
UN Voting Similarity	−0.108	0.056	−0.681
	(0.222)	(0.223)	(0.448)
Alliance Portfolio Similarity	−0.301	−0.521	0.819
	(0.546)	(0.603)	(0.841)
Colonial Ties	0.550***	0.528***	0.340*
	(0.182)	(0.218)	(0.182)
Characteristics of civil war country			
Capabilities (CINC)	−82.111**	−144.710***	1.135
	(34.866)	(47.534)	(7.668)
GDP per Capita	0.048**	0.063**	−0.006
	(0.024)	(0.027)	(0.029)
Polity Score	−0.034***	−0.026*	−0.028
	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.021)
Characteristics of the civil war			
Refugees	0.209	0.251	0.071
	(0.164)	(0.189)	(0.232)
Religion	−0.011	−0.131	−0.006
	(0.316)	(0.418)	(0.414)
Ideology	0.156	0.078	0.310
	(0.163)	(0.184)	(0.198)
Cold War	0.048	0.246	−0.222
	(0.147)	(0.197)	(0.187)
Temporal controls			
Years Since Last Intervention	0.031	0.002	−0.169**
	(0.060)	(0.068)	(0.073)
Years Since Last Intervention^2	−0.012	−0.009	−0.026***
	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.009)
Years Since Last Intervention^3	0.001*	0.000	0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Constant	−2.018***	−1.980***	−3.434***
	(0.341)	(0.384)	(0.571)
N	4,905	4,905	4,905
Log likelihood	−318.979	−249.368	−85.844
Wald χ^2	87.31***	111.75***	122.57***

CINC = Composite Indicator of National Capabilities; GDP = gross domestic product; UN = United Nations.
Robust standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

regional interests would predominate, it is informative to compare the effects of regional- and country-level interests (Figure 3).

In Figure 3, we graph the predicted probability of intervention as the major power's regional and country-level interests increase from their minimum to maximum

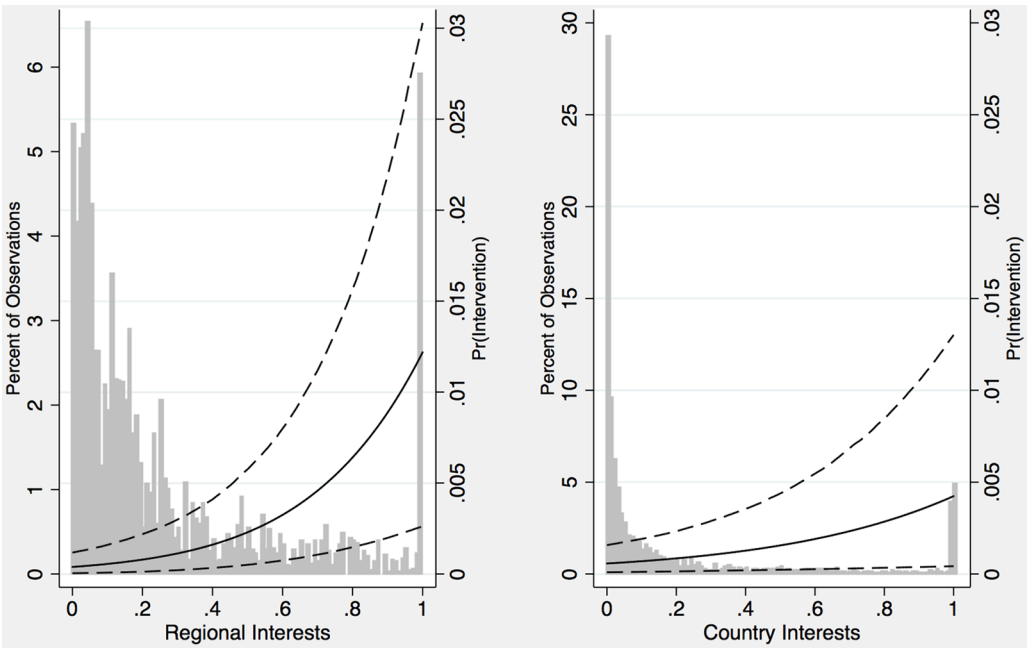

Figure 3. Predicted probability of intervention in civil wars (with 95% confidence intervals).

values.[19] Over each graph, we superimpose a histogram of the frequency distribution at all levels of interests.[20] A comparison of the left- and right-hand graphs shows that this probability increases at a much greater rate when the regional interests increase, while there is only a modest rise in the probability of intervention as a function of country-level interests. This difference in their substantive significance strongly supports our first hypothesis.

Nonetheless, we do not rule out the importance of linkages with the civil war state, the main focus in past research, but rather argue these are conditioned on regional stakes (Hypotheses 2 and 3). When the major power has vested interests in the geopolitical region of the civil war, it sides with the government if its prior ties to the country were strong (H2) and likely would aid the rebels when weak (H3). Rather than interpreting the coefficients from models that include an interaction of two continuous variables, which can be statistically misleading, we graphically display the interrelationship between a major power's geopolitical and country interests. The results from testing these two hypotheses are presented in the second and third columns of Table 2 and in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows the predicted probability of an intervention on the side of the government (the left-hand side) and opposition (the right-hand side) as a function of the major power's joint interests in the region *and* country. Specifically, we graph it while increasing the major power's interests in the country from 0 to 1 (along the horizontal axis) at various levels of its geopolitical interests, ranging from very weak when set to 0 (the solid gray line), their mean value at 0.26, and incremental increases by 1 *SD* (0.29) until we reach the potential intervener's maximum regional interests of 1 (the solid black line). The markers on each line represent statistically significant differences in the probability of intervention.

The findings render strong support for both of our hypotheses. For Hypothesis 2, the left side of Figure 4 indicates that the likelihood of supporting the government generally increases when there are stronger interests in the country. However, this effect is marginal and small when the major power has weak regional interests. At the lowest level of its regional interests, the probability of fighting on the side of the government is almost zero even in situations of their very strong ties. Only when its geopolitical stakes in the region increase, there is also an appreciable increase in the likelihood of using force supporting that government. In this case, the highest probability of pro-government military action is when the major power has strong stakes in both the region and the country as predicted in Hypothesis 2. Returning to our typology of interventions in Figure 1, this corresponds to the contingency in the upper-right quadrant ("Geopolitical Consolidation").

The pattern on the right side of Figure 4 is equally supportive for Hypothesis 3. It is important to note that the incentive to militarily support the rebels is again strongly conditioned on the larger geopolitical context of the surrounding region. At the lower level of the

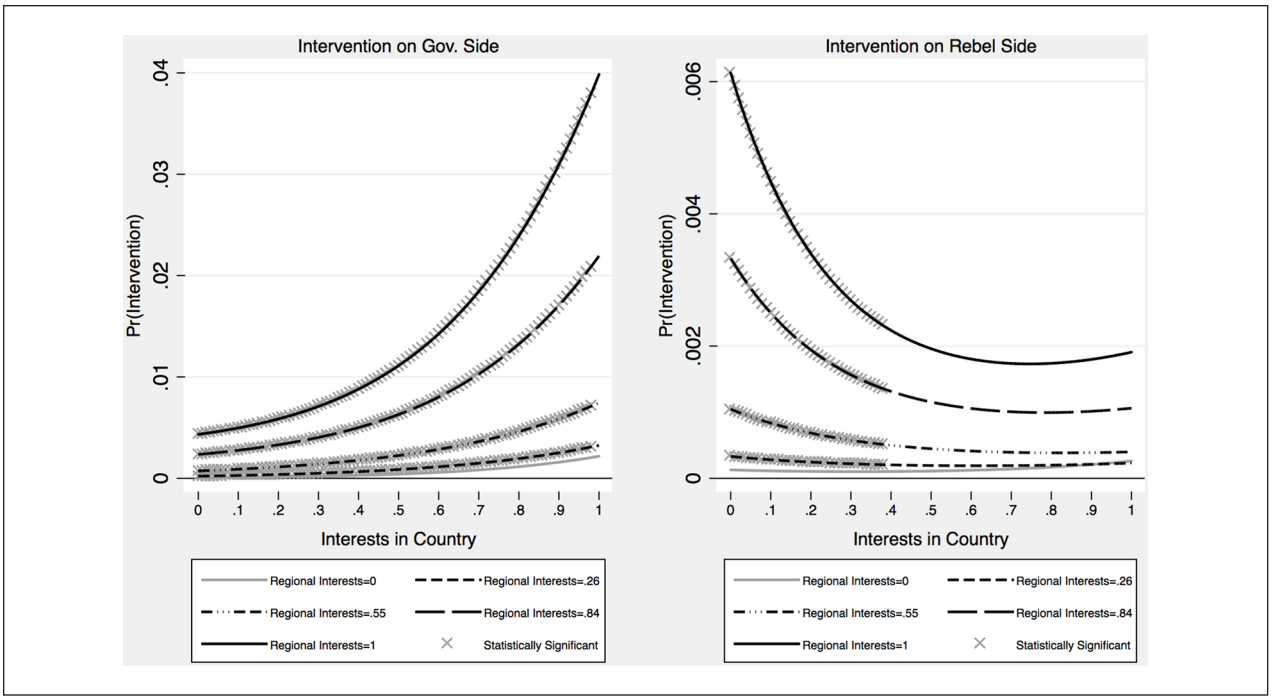

Figure 4. Predicted probability of intervention in civil war: pro-government versus pro-rebel intervention.

potential intervener's regional stakes, the probability of its intervention is marginal. It is most likely to side with the rebels in a geopolitically relevant region, but with weak ties to the government embroiled in civil war. This finding corresponds to the bottom-right quadrant in Figure 1 ("Geopolitical Expansion"). As its established linkages with the country intensify, aid to the rebels becomes less probable and statistically insignificant. Altogether, the results in Table 2 and Figures 3 and 4 strongly validate the hypothesized relationships in our theoretical model.

Among the control variables, we do not find statistical significance for the similarity in UN voting or alliance portfolios, which should indicate similar foreign policy orientations between an intervener and the civil war state. Instead, only former colonial ties are statistically significant. While consistent with the studies showing correlations between the colonial history and interventions (e.g., Findley and Teo 2006; Lemke and Regan 2004), our geopolitical interests variable still has a greater substantive effect. This can be seen in Table 3, reporting the percentage change in the predicted probabilities for all variables.[21]

As for the attributes of the civil war state, our findings suggest that major powers are generally more likely to assist weaker countries in their overall capabilities but economically more developed states as well as autocracies. These trends, however, have no effect on the decision to militarily intervene on the side of the opposition. Most importantly, even when statistically significant, their substantive impact is much weaker than our principal geopolitical variable. As an indicator for humanitarian crises, we find that refugees have no effect on the likelihood of major power intervention, nor do other aspects of the civil war—that is, whether it is ideological, religious, or occurring during or after the Cold War.

Finally, we find evidence that the competing geopolitical interests of other major powers may influence intervention decisions. Pro-government military interferences are less likely when other powers have competing interests in the same region. They are less likely to support rebel groups when another power is closely tied to the country. These findings are consistent with arguments that the presence and behavior of potential rivals significantly affect the strategic calculus for civil war interventions (Findley and Teo 2006; Gent 2007).

Altogether, our empirical analysis lends strong support for our argument that the geopolitics of regional influence shapes the behavior of major powers vis-à-vis civil wars. It also validates our extension of the previous research emphasizing individual ties with civil war states as a factor influencing the decision to intervene. In our theoretical modification and empirical findings, while not as critical and robust as regional interests for an initial decision on whether to intervene, these do point to the direction of intervention, on the side of either the government or the opposition. Their influence is critically conditioned on the presence of geopolitical regional stakes for

Table 3. Change in the Predicted Probability of Intervention in Civil Wars.

	All interventions	Intervention on government side	Intervention on opposition side
	%Δ in probability	%Δ in probability	%Δ in probability
Regional Interests-Potential Intervener (0 to mean + 1 *SD*)	+873.08	—	—
Country Interests-Potential Intervener (0 to mean + 1 *SD*)	+186.69	—	—
Regional Interests (0 to mean + 1 *SD*) Country Interests = 0	—	+1,593.70	+1,055.40
Regional Interests (0 to mean + 1 *SD*) Country Interests = mean + 1 *SD*	—	+1,223.08	+248.69
Country Interests (0 to mean + 1 *SD*) Regional Interests = 0	—	+442.52	+1.22
Country Interests (0 to mean + 1 *SD*) Regional Interests = mean + 1 *SD*	—	+323.80	−69.45
Regional Interests-Other Major Powers (minimum to mean + 1 *SD*)	−89.26	−97.53	(−4.41)
Country Interests-Other Major Powers (minimum to mean + 1 *SD*)	−94.42	(−89.71)	−99.79
Colonial Ties (0 to 1)	+470.20	+524.35	+252.72
Capabilities (CINC) (minimum to mean + 1 *SD*)	−99.99	−100.00	(−15.91)
GDP per Capita (minimum to mean + 1 *SD*)	+220.95	+458.89	(−13.49)
Polity Score (minimum to mean + 1 *SD*)	−49.08	−45.54	(−45.49)

Table 3 reports values for those variables that were statistically significant in Table 2; if any of the coefficients were not statistically significant for such variables, they are enclosed in parentheses. CINC = Composite Indicator of National Capabilities; GDP = gross domestic product.

a major power intervener, as outlined in our model. In the areas of low or no regional stakes, the significance of the individual ties diminishes (see Figures 2–4), as predicted.

Conclusion

As major powers are most frequent military interveners in civil wars (see Pearson, Baumann, and Pickering 1994), we look at their principal motivations for military actions. The heart of our argument is that the geopolitical location of the civil conflict critically matters in motivating them to resort to force. They will do so if the domestic conflict is taking place in the region of high stakes. This means that a major power has already established influence in the region through linkages with most, though not necessarily all, states in that area. Individual ties with the civil war state alone, the strategic linkage that was most explored in the past (e.g., Findley and Teo 2006; Gent 2007; Lemke and Regan 2004), do not provide sufficient grounds to expect an intervention in our model. We instead propose that the specific interests in the civil war state need be amended to explain both when major powers are likely to interfere and why we observe military interventions even in states with which its strategic ties are not strong. Our geopolitical approach to the larger regional context also accounts for the absence of interventions in cases when a major power's "client" state is destabilized by internal strife, that is, it might be a state with close relations with a major power but situated in a low-stake region (the so-called "foothold" attempts).

In addition, our approach to regional interests is not premised on an intervener's motivation to prevent contagion as done in a few past studies of the regional context of interventions (for that angle, see Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Kathman 2011; Rost and Greig 2011). Instead, we turn to the issue of whether civil wars provide an opportunity for major powers to establish, consolidate, or expand their geopolitical influences in regions of strategic value. At its core, therefore, our theory is formed in the tradition of realpolitik interpretations of major power behavior, including their "sphere of influence" policies (Danilovic 2002; Gilpin 1981; Hensel and Diehl 1994; Krasner 1999; Mearsheimer 2001; Morgenthau 1948). Contributing to this line of research as well, we address the issues that have not been closely scrutinized.

We have shown that geopolitical interests prime major powers for intervention and that individual ties with the

civil war state affect which side to support militarily. This leads to additional lines meriting future research. For example, while we examined military interventions, it would be interesting to assess whether and when the powers with vested interests opt for other types of intervention as well. A comparison to regional powers could be another line of inquiry.

Also, if the dynamics of a major power's geopolitical interests are closely examined over time, it might show whether more durable commitments are more conducive for intervention than those just recently established, or whether a major power's presence in the region is in the rising or declining stage and how that would affect its choice of intervention instruments, and similar. Given the virtual absence of analytically rigorous treatments of "spheres of interests," a research gap recently lamented in the scholarship (see, for example, Danilovic 2002; Etzioni 2015; Hast 2014), more robust studies of the dynamics and evolution of "spheres of influence" would facilitate further refinements about the possible impact of these changes on a major power's decision to intervene in civil wars. Our analysis lends strong justification for such further explorations in this area.

Our brief illustrative cases additionally reveal that qualitative research with detailed comparative case studies can significantly contribute to the growth of knowledge from quantitative analyses. These can uncover the aspects and processes, such as the fast office-holding shifts between the warring sides or their policy agendas that might necessarily put either side at odds with outside interveners (as revealed in our case illustrations), that are difficult, even hardly possible, to capture in quantitative studies with large data sets. While the latter, such as ours, are essential for generalizations of a greater spatial and temporal scope, the former are needed for more focused and fine-grained analysis.

In sum, our theory predicts that interventions by major powers are more likely in those civil wars that take place in strategically relevant regions for their interests. In such regional area, an intervener's prior ties to the civil war state then determine the direction of militarized support. When there are established close relations between them, a major power will side with the government, but would aid the rebels in their absence while occurring in a high-stakes region. The evidence from our quantitative empirical analysis of civil war interventions by all major powers during the post-WWII period (1946–2000) strongly validates this line of theoretical argument.

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. We are not suggesting that humanitarian motivations are entirely absent, but that the principal incentives are strategic in nature. Otherwise, we should observe humanitarian interventions in a greater number of internal conflicts that inflicted large-scale civilian casualties.
2. Although somewhat related to the third-party role in international conflicts (Pickering and Mitchell 2018), distinct factors and processes arguably separate interventions in intra-state violence from those between states.
3. To illustrate the difference from the related theoretical models, we would point to Kathman's (2011) analysis of an intervener's interests in the surrounding regional states. A critical distinction is in our different analytical angle and theoretical motivation. Whereas his focus on the contagion effects properly directs him to examine the linkages only with the bordering neighbors to the civil war states, our goal to understand the larger geopolitical context directs us to the dynamics of an intervener's interests in each region in its entirety. Nor does Kathman need to identify the importance of the neighboring states in an intervener's broader (regional or global) interest portfolio as it is not relevant for his angle, while it is essential for our argument about major power behavior.
4. This is not to suggest a sequential process, as there is no temporal dimension in the decision to intervene based on these two factors. Their nature is contextual, not temporal, and it is reasonable to assume that the consideration of both issues is fairly simultaneous.
5. Although their focus was not on military interventions but rather on state-led peacekeeping, it is nonetheless interesting that Rost and Greig (2011) found such individual linkages to play a greater role for non-major powers than major powers.
6. We ran a reliability test by reestimating our models on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Armed Conflict Dataset on civil wars and military interventions from their data on "external support." The results were consistent with those reported here for pro-government interventions. However, due to the reduced time frame to 1975–2009, there was an insufficient number of pro-opposition cases (only 5) for model estimation. For this reason, we could not use the UCDP external support data set but nonetheless report the robustness test in the supplementary appendix. Another potential source is

Pickering and Kisangani's (2006) updated version of the International Military Interventions, covering a slightly longer period (1947–2005). It does not include civil wars unless there was a military intervention, whereas Regan includes all civil war cases, regardless of third-party interference. This makes Regan's data set more suitable for our purposes as we seek to understand why these occur in the first place.

7. The included major powers are the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia/USSR, and, after 1950, China. This list is consistent with the Correlates of War identification of major powers as well as Danilovic (2002) whose list of geopolitical regions is used in our analysis.
8. This excludes less costly actions such as providing equipment/aid or intelligence.
9. We also estimated models of "initiation" with interventions coded 1 in the first year only. The results remain consistent with our findings for each intervention year and are available in the supplementary appendix.
10. In Regan's (2002) data, the term "target" refers to the side that receives the support, not the side that the third party is targeting.
11. While a one-year lag can occur both before and during the civil war, especially in cases of protracted conflicts, to control for the possibility of a potential intervener's increased intensity of interests due to the support triggered by the civil war itself, we also reestimated all our models with the lagged variables strictly prior to the intervention. The findings remain consistent and are reported in the supplementary appendix.
12. See Danilovic (2002, 98–116) for a detailed conceptual discussion and operational rules for identifying sixteen geopolitical regions, with the difference that we include only one for Africa. We also reestimated our models after separating Africa into four geopolitical regions (West, Central, East, and Southern Africa), and the results remain unchanged. These are reported in the supplementary appendix.
13. As for the composite measures based on alliances and trade, a similar measurement was later used in Kathman's (2011) analysis of civil war interventions though constructed somewhat differently, and given his research focus on the incentive to contain contagion to bordering states, it was not aggregated to the entire geopolitical region.
14. While an important addition for conceptual reasons, arms transfers do not alter the statistical findings from alliances and trade alone. The results from the reestimation of our models after excluding arms transfers are presented in the supplementary appendix.
15. Although the results remain unchanged when we estimate models with and without this transformation, we opt for such a recalculation to allow for the comparability across different major powers given that some have their vested interests more globally dispersed than others.
16. The Stockholm Peace Research Institute data, http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php
17. Postestimation tests for multicollinearity showed that this is not an issue in our models. The variance inflation factors (VIFs) were all below the limit to indicate any potential problems. Only temporal controls were highly correlated with one another. Estimates from models that drop the temporal controls are consistent with our main results.
18. As a robustness test, included in the supplementary appendix, we reestimated our models after including control variables for the presence of other interveners (either major or minor powers) on the side of the government and opposition, and also a major power's geographic distance from the civil war state. Our findings remain unaltered.
19. Like all other empirical studies of civil war interventions or military conflicts in general, these are rare events. Any predicted probabilities generated from such data will be in the lower range as in, for example, Figures 3 and 4. That said, these only reflect the "rare event" phenomenon and do not by any means indicate a weak substantive significance of the predictors. We also reestimated our models using rare events logit, reported in the supplementary appendix, and the results from the rare event sensitivity test did not alter our findings.
20. As also seen in Figure 2, most civil wars occur at the lower levels of a major power's interests. Still, we find a considerable number of cases beyond such low levels. Thirty percent of all observations are above the mean value of regional interests (0.25), and 25 percent fall above the mean of country-level interests (0.20).
21. We use the standard procedure starting with a baseline probability when all variables are set at their mean (for continuous variables) or modal (for dichotomous variables) values. For the updated probability, each independent variable is then individually changed from 0 to 1 for dichotomous variables and the minimum to 1 *SD* above the mean for continuous variables. The percentage change is calculated as [(updated probability−baseline probability) / baseline probability] × 100 (see also Findley and Teo 2006).

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