

Under what conditions do states engage in maritime provocations?

Hayoun Jessie Ryou-Ellison & Aaron Gold distill the findings from their research article, "[Moral hazard at sea: how alliances actually increase low-level maritime provocations between allies](#)," published in [International Interactions](#) Vol. 46 Issue 1. The article is free-access until March 31, 2020.

News of international maritime disputes – such as those between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean Sea, Britain and Spain over Gibraltar, Japan and Russia over the southern Kuril Islands, and between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors in the South China Sea – demonstrate that the management of maritime claims is an important issue in the study of interstate conflict. Worldwide, the rise in the number of maritime disputes has increased sharply over the past century.

Since World War II, most contested maritime claims have been associated with low-level conflicts, mainly shows of force, and have not resulted in fatalities. However, it is puzzling that many competing claims exist among states which are alliance partners.

In our paper, we argue states manage such conflicts in distinct ways. Specifically, we contend that, rather than primarily relying on the use of force, challenger states prefer to manage their maritime claims by engaging in low-level violations. These violations (such as sending their merchant marine, patrol boats, or coast guard ships into disputed waters), are what we call low-level maritime provocations. States might be motivated to engage in this kind of low-level conflict because, if the defending state fails to protest, this can, over time, lead to a legal claim as customary international law binds state behavior.

Joint membership in highly institutionalized security organizations, namely defensive alliances, provides aggrieved challenger states with the opportunity to undermine the position of defending states by using low-level maritime provocations. The alliance has an incentive to provide an institutional security umbrella to maintain its strength and continuity. High levels of commitment to defensive alliances provide a challenger state with the opportunity to behave provocatively without risking an escalation of conflict or severely damaging its reputation within the alliance. We test our theory using data on all maritime claims and their associated militarization attempts in the Western Hemisphere and Europe from 1900 to 2001 from the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project.

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