

Can a state's belligerence improve its diplomatic status?

Steven Ward describes the outcomes of his research article, "[Status from fighting? Reassessing the relationship between conflict involvement and diplomatic rank](#)," published in [International Interactions](#) Volume 46, Issue 2.

Does conflict boost status? This is an important question for both international relations theory and foreign policy. For one, the answer has implications for how scholars conceptualize the relationship between status dissatisfaction and belligerence. Many analysts think about this link in terms of emotional and social psychological dynamics, or pathological domestic political processes that push leaders in states where concerns about international status are salient to embrace hawkish policies. An important alternative view – promoted most forcefully by Jonathan Renshon – suggests that status dissatisfaction leads to interstate conflict because demonstrating military capacity is an effective means of forcing other actors to update their beliefs about the state's proper status. In other words, according to this view, belligerence is a sensible response to status dissatisfaction, rather than a common (and regrettable) error that status-dissatisfied states make.

The answer to this question also matters for policy. If conflict is an effective means of improving status, then leaders who want to boost their state's standing internationally are right to seek out and initiate disputes. This has implications for how we interpret history: Germany before World War I, for instance, might have been behaving sensibly by provoking conflicts around the world in order to force other actors to treat Berlin with greater deference. It also has implications for how we think about the world today: should China and Russia – as states dissatisfied with their international standing – resort to military threats or even the use of force to redress their grievances? Or is this sort of costly behavior unlikely to yield a significant improvement in status?

Renshon's recent research suggests that conflict involvement does indeed improve the belligerent's status. Renshon shows this most convincingly by demonstrating an association between conflict initiation and subsequent improvements in diplomatic rank. States that initiate a militarized interstate dispute (a MID) improve their diplomatic rank – their rank according to the number and type of diplomats that they host in their capitals – by 1.4 positions over five years and 2.7 positions over ten years. Initiating a MID constitutes a public display of military capacity, which apparently prompts observers to update their beliefs about the importance of the initiator, and, consequently, decide to begin or upgrade diplomatic relations. This constitutes empirical support for the notion that status dissatisfaction leads to belligerence through strategic – rather than emotional, social psychological, or domestic pathological – mechanisms. It also means that leaders should take conflict initiation seriously as a solution to the problem of low or inadequate international status.

Renshon's analyses control for capabilities (using the standard Composite Index of National Capabilities measure – which combines information about six concrete indicators of material power) as a potential confounder. This is important because it could be, for instance, that greater material power simultaneously makes states more belligerent and more attractive as targets for diplomatic exchange. Renshon's results suggest that the relationship between conflict and status persists even when we control for CINC as a linear predictor of change in diplomatic rank.

I show, though, that the relationship between CINC and change in diplomatic rank is not linear. Instead, the weaker a state is, the greater the effect of similar-sized differences in CINC on diplomatic rank. This means that imposing linearity on that relationship produces what is, in effect, a problem of omitted variable bias. If we fit a line through the relationship between CINC and change in diplomatic rank, this overestimates this relationship among relatively powerful states and – correspondingly and more importantly – underestimates this relationship among relatively weak states. Because the relationship between MID initiation and diplomatic rank is also

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strongest among relatively weak states, this raises the possibility that that association is only evident because Renshon's linear approach fails to adequately capture the strong effect of small differences in capabilities on change in diplomatic rank near the bottom of the CINC distribution.

I further demonstrate that modeling this non-linearity eliminates the positive effect of MID initiation on change in diplomatic rank. It also weakens the strong positive effect of MID victory on status. This is true whether we account for non-linearity by log-transforming the CINC index, by using a fractional polynomial estimator, or by using a spline-based approach. All models that account for non-linearity share two important characteristics: they fit the data better than Renshon's linear approach, and they return estimates of the effect of MID initiation on change in diplomatic rank that are much smaller and statistically indistinguishable from zero.

This reanalysis has important implications not only for how we theorize the relationship between status-dissatisfaction and conflict, and for how policymakers think about conflict as a solution to status dissatisfaction, but also, more broadly, for quantitative research that uses the CINC index to control for material capabilities. While many scholars log-transform the CINC index to make it more closely approximate a normal distribution, this is not a universal practice. Future work should be more consistently attentive to non-linearity in the relationship between CINC and the outcome variable – and to the possibility that failing to address this may lead to faulty estimates of the effect of the variable of interest on the outcome.

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