

## Colonial Legacies and Territorial Claims

**Paul R. Hensel**

Department of Political Science  
University of North Texas  
1155 Union Circle #305340  
Denton, TX 76203-5017  
phensel@unt.edu

**Abstract:** Most of today's states experienced colonial rule at some point during the last two centuries, with well-studied economic, political, and social consequences after decolonization. This study examines a different form of the colonial legacy, involving the stability of the territorial status quo. We consider both positive and negative effects that colonial legacies might have on borders. A combination of quantitative analysis with several brief case studies suggest that colonial legacies generally have a negative impact on territorial conflict after independence, with conflict most likely in relations between former colonies of the same colonizer.

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, March 2023. An earlier version of this project was presented at the conference "National Territory and Sovereignty: Sixty Years Since the Founding of the Nation," Seoul, August 2008. Portions of this research were supported by a research grant from the Northeast Asian History Foundation, although the authors retain full responsibility for all content herein. The authors do not take official positions on any territorial questions discussed herein, and this project's analyses and conclusions may not necessarily represent the views of the Foundation or any other organization.

## Colonial Legacies and Territorial Claims

In July 2008, the month before a paper describing this project was presented at a conference in Seoul, a number of territorial claims made world headlines, prompting statements by leaders and journalists alike about the colonial origins of the claims in question. In July 2008 Japan issued guidelines for how teachers should instruct their students about the Japanese claim to the islets known as Takeshima in Japan and as Dokdo in Korea. The South Korean government protested strongly, rejecting the Japanese claim as an extension of Japan's previous colonial rule over Korea. The Nigerian legislature debated a motion to reverse the government's decision to comply with an International Court of Justice ruling by handing over the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon, in a territorial claim that dates to the period when the two were colonies of Great Britain and France. Thailand and Cambodia also moved hundreds of soldiers to their border near the Preah Vihear temple, in another territorial claim that dates to the time when Cambodia was a French colony. While the details of these cases vary, in each case the territorial problem in question is said to have resulted from a colonial legacy.

Most states were ruled as colonies or other dependencies of at least one foreign power,<sup>1</sup> so if colonial legacies do affect events after independence, much of the world seems likely to be affected. Recognizing this, scholars have examined the effects of colonialism on such economic phenomena as development or trade (e.g. Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1978; Acemoglu et al. 2001, 2002; Blanton, Mason, and Athow 2001; Athow and Blanton 2002; Easterly and Levine 2003; Mahoney 2003; Lange et al. 2006) and such political phenomena as democratic stability or ethnic conflict (e.g. Blondel 1972; Bollen 1979; Clague et al. 2001; Huntington 1984; Bollen and Jackman 1985; Lipset, Seong, and Torres 1993; Bernhard et al. 2004). Little systematic attention has been devoted to territorial claims, though, which is the purpose of the present paper.

We begin by discussing the possible forms that colonial legacies might take with respect to territorial claims. Newly independent states generally come into existence with borders that were established under colonial rule. Not only did the colonial ruler have an opportunity to shape the political, economic, and social development of its dependencies, but it also had an opportunity to settle their borders -- or to leave them unsettled. Actions taken during the colonial

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<sup>1</sup> The ICOW Colonial History data set reveals that 183 of 222 states that have existed in the modern interstate system (82.4%) were ruled as a dependency or part of at least one foreign state.

era may have substantial positive or negative impacts after independence, with respect to the stability of borders with neighboring states as well as relations with the former colonizer. We present several hypotheses about the conditions under which these different legacies are most likely to take effect. Empirical analyses suggest that colonial legacies have had important and systematic effects on territorial conflict, with such conflict being more likely between neighbors who shared the same colonial ruler. We conclude by discussing implications of these results, and by suggesting promising directions for future research on this topic.

### **Theoretical Development**

While numerous territorial claims are said to be related to some sort of vague "colonial legacy," the analyst must be careful to specify exactly what is meant by this legacy and how it might be expected to affect territorial conflict. If this is not done in an analytically rigorous way, then the concept of colonial legacies offers little scientific value. We begin by laying out what we believe to be the most important forms of colonial legacies with respect to territorial conflict. We then present and test preliminary hypotheses on the conditions under which each legacy is most likely to be relevant.

We must begin this section by emphasizing that this project is not currently focused on territorial claims that involve the territory of at least one current colony or dependency. We consider such cases to be part of the colonial era itself, and note that the colonial legacy in such cases is still being developed. The impact of colonialism during the colonial era is likely to be much different than its impact after decolonization, although future work should examine the colonial era in more detail than we do here.

We distinguish between two broad categories of colonial legacies with respect to territorial conflict after independence. The colonial experience may worsen the risk of territorial conflict with neighbors after a colony achieves independence, or it may improve the relationship. We now discuss each of these categories, before turning to empirical analyses that can be used to evaluate how accurate each has been in modern history and under which conditions.

#### **Colonial Legacy Worsened Territorial Relations with Neighbors**

Aspects of the colonial period may worsen territorial relations between former colonies after independence, whether by creating territorial claims that might otherwise have been

avoided or by worsening or escalating the management of claims. This perspective begins with the assumption that colonial powers generally pursued their own military, strategic, economic and political interests during the colonial era, doing little to further the interests of the colonies themselves (except to the extent that this occurred naturally through pursuit of the colonizer's own self-interest). For example, colonial powers typically oriented their colonies' economies around the export of raw materials and agricultural products needed by the colonial powers, rather than the development of their internal colonial markets. In colonial Spanish America, the individual colonies were restricted from trading with each other; few ports were created; and incentives for short-term Spanish economic gain were generally greater than the incentives of long-range local economic development (North et al. 1999: 32-35).

Politically, many colonies were ruled from abroad with little opportunity for self-rule. At independence, then, most former colonies lacked local leaders with real political experience, and their political institutions were often introduced hurriedly as the colonizers abandoned their colonies. In colonial Latin America, "autonomous institutions of self government existed only at the most local level, and possessed heavily circumscribed authorities" (North et al. 1999: 37). A variety of recent research has begun to examine the impact of colonial legacies on economic growth or development since independence, often focusing on the economic and political institutions that were created during the colonial era as a key explanatory factor (e.g. Hanson 1989; Grier 1999; Acemoglu et al. 2001, 2002; Easterly and Levine 2003; Mahoney 2003; Lange et al. 2006; Angeles 2007; Nunn 2007).

A similar point can be made regarding former colonies' borders. Colonial powers typically defined borders for their colonies with the colonizers' interests in mind rather than those of the colonies themselves, consistent with their political, social and economic management of the colonies. Indeed, colonial powers had incentives to disrupt any previously existing borders that might have been more "natural." The preservation of traditional political entities could lead to challenges against the colonizer's interests, which could be minimized by disrupting traditional forms of organization. This point is most noticeable in Africa, where colonial borders were typically drawn artificially at times like the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, and reflected the colonial powers' interests rather than local ethnic, tribal, economic, or other considerations. Athow and Blanton (2002: 220) note, for example, that the Berlin Conference and similar efforts were designed to delimit administrative boundaries in light of "how they

could best break down traditional social and economic networks for more efficient social control and resource extraction.” This lack of concern for the colonies’ interests in the definition of borders would lead one to expect that borders defined during the colonial period should be contested frequently after independence because they did not reflect the interests of the local populations; once the entities on both sides of a colonial border obtain independence, they would seem likely to pursue revised borders that reflect their own respective interests rather than those of the former colonizer.

Another problem concerns the incentives for a complete and accurate demarcation between colonies. The colonizer may not have had an interest in expending great time and effort to establish clear and well-marked borders with neighboring colonies; clearly demarcated borders would only seem to be a concern in the event that the neighboring colony was beginning to threaten the resource extraction that attracted the colonizer in the first place. This lack of incentives for clear demarcation would seem to be especially true for borders between two colonies ruled by the same foreign power. For example, the Spanish likely faced less pressure to settle borders between their former colonies in South America than to settle borders between their possessions and those of Portugal or Great Britain. To the extent that borders within a single colonizer’s possessions were defined during the colonial era, there would seem to be a greater risk of incomplete or contradictory border delimitation because of the lack of urgency for defining and demarcating clear borders within the same empire.

This discussion suggests a number of reasons that events during the colonial era could worsen relations between postcolonial states after independence:

(1) The first and most direct connection involves the existence of an unsettled border at independence. If the colonizer(s) that controlled the two sides of the border had not yet agreed on the status or location of the border upon decolonization, it seems probable that the border would remain under contention after the colonies became independent.

(2) Second, even if the colonizers themselves accepted the border before the colonies became independent, future challenges would seem likely if the colonies’ residents disagreed with their colonial rulers’ views on the border upon decolonization.

(3) Finally, even if both colonial governments and their residents accepted the border at independence, new claims could conceivably arise based on the way the border was settled. For example, new claims would seem to be possible if not likely if the colonizers had based the

border on inaccurate or incomplete maps; if the border was shown in contradictory places on different maps; if the border split tribal, ethnic, or other groups or separated population centers from ports, valuable resource deposits, or other desired areas; or especially if such divisions were created by changing the border or reallocating territories from one unit to another during the colonial era. In each of these situations, the colonial border may be regarded as unsatisfactory by the postcolonial state on one or both sides, leading to the outbreak of a territorial claim and potentially to armed conflict.

This discussion leads to the following hypothesis about relations between two states that were both dependencies of at least one foreign power. We believe that there is an important distinction between two former colonies that were both ruled by the same colonizer (as in the borders between former Spanish colonies in Latin America or between former French colonies in West Africa) and two former colonies that were ruled by different colonizers (as in the borders between Spanish colonies and Brazil in Latin America or between British and French colonies in Africa).

***Hypothesis 1 (lack of urgency):** Territorial conflict should be more likely between two former colonies of the same colonial power than between two former colonies of different colonial powers or between states that were not colonized, due to the lower urgency for the colonizer to establish clear and accepted borders during the colonial era.*

### **Colonial Legacy Improved Territorial Relations with Neighbors**

Alternatively, aspects of the colonial period may improve territorial relations between former colonies after independence, whether by preventing territorial claims that might otherwise have started or by settling or deescalating claims once they have begun. There are several ways that this effect might have been reached. First, there could be a general argument that colonial borders -- however flawed -- should be preserved in the interest of preventing fratricidal conflict among newly independent states; this would presumably lead to the avoidance of territorial claims that otherwise might have been raised. Second, there could be a general sense of solidarity among postcolonial states, which might lead them to pursue more peaceful and cooperative solutions to their problems; this might not prevent territorial claims from beginning,

but it would presumably help to ensure that they are managed peacefully rather than through armed conflict.

The first of these possibilities is closely related to the legal concept of *uti possidetis juris* or *uti possidetis de jure*, defined by *Black's Law Dictionary* as “The doctrine that old administrative boundaries will become international boundaries when a political subdivision achieves independence” (Garner 1999: 1544; see also Brownlie 1998: 133, Malanczuk 1997: 162-163, Prescott 1987: 105-106, Ratner 1996; Shaw 1997: 216). *Uti possidetis* first emerged in the modern sense with the decolonization of Latin America in the early 19th century, as the former Spanish colonies loosely applied the principle both in their frontier disputes with each other and in those with Brazil (Brownlie 1998: 132; Ireland 1938: 321-328; Ratner 1996: 593-595; Shaw 1997: 356 ff).<sup>2</sup> Each state was to be recognized as possessing all territories that were presumed to be possessed by its colonial predecessor as of 1810 (for South America) or 1821 (for Central America), reflecting the last periods of unchallenged Spanish rule (and thus the last times that borders could be considered to have been under Spanish authority). Under this principle, there would be no possibility of new claims based on *terra nullius* (territory belonging to no state) or of claims by extraregional states. In addition, there should be little or no conflict among the bordering states themselves because of the clear identification of each border's location based on colonial-era administrative lines.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the Latin American origins of the modern *uti possidetis* principle, it has subsequently been applied elsewhere. Most notably, the principle is enshrined in the OAU's 1963 charter and 1964 Cairo Declaration, in which the African leaders pledged “to respect the frontiers existing on their achievement of independence.” The borders between European colonies in Africa were often unnatural, cutting across traditional ethnic or linguistic groups and producing ill-fitting multiethnic colonial entities. As a result, leaders in the region chose to avoid uncertainty and conflict by preserving their existing colonial boundaries; it was feared that

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<sup>2</sup> Brazil generally rejected the application of *uti possidetis de jure* in favor of *uti possidetis de facto*, an alternative doctrine that determines ownership of territory based on physical occupation rather than colonial title. Brazil used this alternative doctrine to argue for the expansion of its territory beyond the 1810 borders with former Spanish colonies such as Bolivia and Peru (see Ganzert 1934: 430ff and Tambs 1966: 255ff).

<sup>3</sup> As typically applied, this doctrine only offered a general guideline for determining borders, and allowed two parties to depart from the colonial-era administrative boundaries through mutual agreement if desired (Brownlie 1998: 133; Ratner 1996: 593, 598-601; Shaw 1997: 216).

allowing challenges to any African borders on the grounds of illegitimacy could lead to the emergence of challenges against virtually every African border for the same reason. (Malanczuk 1997: 162; Ratner 1996: 595-596; Zacher 2001: 221-223)

The general applicability of this principle is described well in the 1986 International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision in the *Frontier Dispute (Burkina Faso/Republic of Mali)* case. The ICJ had been asked to settle the location of a segment of the border between Mali and Burkina Faso, both of which had been part of French West Africa before independence. In its judgment, the ICJ emphasized the legal principle of *uti possidetis juris*:

the principle is not a special rule which pertains solely to one specific system of international law, It is a general principle, which is logically connected with the phenomenon of the obtaining of independence wherever it occurs. Its obvious purpose is to prevent the independence and stability of new States being endangered by fratricidal struggles provoked by the challenging of frontiers following the withdrawal of the administering power. (ICJ 1986: ¶ 20)<sup>4</sup>

The ICJ judgment in the Mali-Burkina Faso *Frontier Dispute* case also argued that the principle of *uti possidetis* should apply in any decolonization situation, regardless of the legal or political status of the entities on each side of the border:

The territorial boundaries which have to be respected may also derive from international frontiers which previously divided a colony of one State from a colony of another, or indeed a colonial territory from the territory of an independent State, or one which was under protectorate, but had retained its international personality. There is no doubt that the obligation to respect pre-existing international frontiers in the event of State succession derives from a general rule of international law, whether or not the rule is expressed in the formula of *uti possidetis*. (ICJ 1986: ¶ 24)

The judgment went on to argue explicitly that this principle is so general as to apply regardless of geographic region or temporal era, rejecting the possibility that *uti possidetis* should not apply

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<sup>4</sup> See also Malanczuk (1997: 162-163), as well as the full ICJ judgment at <[http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/ICases/iHVM/ihvm\\_ijudgment/ihvm\\_ijudgment\\_19861222.pdf](http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/ICases/iHVM/ihvm_ijudgment/ihvm_ijudgment_19861222.pdf)>.



in Africa because the continent followed different legal principles than those followed in other regions or because this specific doctrine had not been proclaimed for Africa as of these two states' independence in 1960. This judgment suggests that -- at least by the 1980s -- the legitimacy of colonial borders was widely recognized as a standard legal principle that should help to prevent the outbreak of escalation of territorial claims between former colonies.

Beyond the principle of accepting colonial borders in order to avoid the risks inherent in territorial claims, a second way that the colonial legacy might reduce territorial conflict involves the creation of feelings of solidarity between former colonies. The history of anti-colonial struggle would appear to be a force favoring friendly relations with other former dependencies, each of which underwent similar struggles against colonial rule. To the extent that each colony achieved its freedom from the struggle against the same colonizer (and around the same time), there should be a greater sense of community among them, based on the shared identity of those who have fought against a common enemy. This sense of community should be strengthened by the shared language, religion, and other cultural details that are typically spread throughout a colonizer's possessions following decades of rule by the colonial power.

As Domínguez et al. (2003: 22) argue, "Most Spanish American elites accepted the norm that they were part of a larger cultural and possible political entity." Rather than disrupt the relations among the members of this fraternity of new states, there would appear to be an incentive to avoid inflammatory issues such as territorial demands on neighbors, and to resolve outstanding issues as quickly and peacefully as possible. Domínguez et al. (2003: 22-23) suggest that "The consequence of the spreading ideology of Latin American solidarity, fostering peacemaking, was the evolution of the expectation and practice that countries from all the Americas should engage in conflict containment and conflict settlement wherever conflict emerged." It is not clear, though, whether this solidarity among former colonies should extend to former dependencies of other colonial powers, which were colonized by a different foreign power and did not necessarily share the same language, religion, or culture.

***Hypothesis 2 (solidarity):** Territorial conflict should be less likely between two former colonies of the same colonial power than between two former colonies of different colonial powers or between states that were not colonized, due to the greater sense of solidarity between the former colonies after independence.*

*Hypothesis 3 (Uti Possidetis): Territorial conflict should be less likely in the regions of Latin America and Africa, due to the regional emphasis on border stability after independence.*

### **Research Design**

In order to evaluate these preliminary hypotheses on the impact of the colonial legacy, we will run a logistic regression analysis of territorial conflict in the modern era. We focus on the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) Territorial Claims data set, which covers the world from 1816-2001 (Frederick, Hensel, and Macaulay 2017). Territorial claims involve explicit contention between the official representatives of two or more states regarding sovereignty over a specific piece of territory. Each observation in our data set represents one year in the history of one pair of neighbors, with the goal of determining the conditions under which territorial conflict is most likely to break out.

### **Measuring Territorial Conflict**

The ICOW Territorial Claims data set identifies territorial conflict using the COW project's Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data set, which covers interactions involving the threat, display, or use of military force between two or more nation-states (Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004). Because this data set is only interested in militarized disputes over territorial issues, the ICOW project examined each MID that occurred during a territorial claim to determine whether or not it was directly related to the claim, as described by Hensel et al. (2008); MIDs that were not part of the territorial claim are not included.

In addition to the main analyses that study the outbreak of armed conflict over territorial issues, we also report analyses that only study the outbreak of fatal armed conflicts over territory. The MID data includes a large number of militarized disputes that lasted a relatively short time and never involved a serious perception that full-scale war was likely, because they involved isolated threats to use force or displays of force but never led to deaths on the battlefield. In order to make sure that the results are not being driven by such low-level disputes, we focus our second set of models on cases that produced at least one battlefield fatality among regular military forces during the course of the dispute. These cases are much more serious and much closer to war than isolated threats, so limiting the analysis to fatal disputes offers a reasonable level of assurance that the results are meaningful and do not reflect isolated posturing by leaders.

## Measuring Colonial Legacies

Our measurement of colonial legacies is based on version 1.1 of the ICOW project's Colonial History data set. This data set records the colonizer(s), if any, that ruled over each member of the COW interstate system before independence. We use this information to categorize the colonial legacy for every territorial claim:

- Same colonizer legacy: both states were colonized by the same colonial power.
- Different colonizer legacy: the states were colonized by different colonial powers.
- Former colonizer dyad: one state was colonized by the other.
- Current colonial dyad: at least one of the claimants in this territorial claim is administering or claiming the territory as part of a colony or dependency.<sup>5</sup>

In order to test Hypothesis 3 about regional effects, dummy variables were created to measure the possible impact of *Uti Possidetis* in the Americas and Africa. For the Americas, this variable is coded as 1 for all territorial claims between two states that should have been affected by the *Uti Possidetis* doctrine – essentially the region's former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, as there was never any formal expectation that the UK, France, or the Netherlands (or their colonies after achieving independence) would abide by this doctrine. Similarly, for Africa, this is coded as 1 for all territorial claims between two African states, leaving out all claims involving one or more extra-regional powers.

For now, our main analyses do not distinguish between different types of empires. Some work on colonial legacies distinguishes between overseas empires (such as the Spanish empire in Latin America) and land empires (such as the Hapsburg or Ottoman empires); see, for example, Bernhard et al. (2004: 227). For now we consider either type of empire interchangeably in our primary analyses, although we will return to this topic in a followup analysis that is meant to investigate the robustness of our results.

## Control Variables

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<sup>5</sup> Most territorial claims involving former colonizer dyads are also technically current colonial dyads, as such cases typically involve borders between now-independent former colonies and remaining colonies held by the same colonial power. Because this is a specific type of colonial legacy, we code such cases in the former colonizer category rather than the current colonial category.

Our analyses also control for several variables that have repeatedly been found to be important in past quantitative studies of international conflict. Drawing from past research on territorial claims, we control for the salience or value of the claimed territory and for the amount of recent armed conflict over the claim (Hensel 2001; Hensel et al. 2008); we expect to see a greater likelihood of conflict when the territory is more salient and when there has been a greater amount of recent conflict over the claim. We use the Territorial Claims data set to identify whether at least one of the two claimant states is contiguous to the claimed territory via land or less than 400 miles of open sea, expecting that conflict will be more likely in such cases than when the territory is more distant. We use the Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) score from the COW project's National Material Capabilities data set to measure the disparity in relative capabilities between each pair of states. The specific measure used is the percentage of total capabilities held by the stronger state, which can range from 0.50 (where the two states are exactly even) to 1.0 (where the stronger state holds all of the capabilities in the pair). Finally, we use the Polity IV data to measure the presence or absence of joint democracy, which is defined as present when both sides have values of at least six out of a possible ten on the Polity index of institutionalized democracy.

### **Quantitative Analyses**

Our analyses begin with descriptive analyses of the basic relationships at work before moving on to more complex multivariate analyses. Tables 1 and 2 present a summary of the relationship between colonial legacies and territorial conflict between neighbors, with one observation for each territorial claim in the data set. Whether we are examining all territorial conflict or only the more serious category of fatal territorial conflicts, the results are statistically significant for both total and fatal territorial conflicts and quite consistent.

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

The most dangerous situation involves a pair of states that were both colonized by the same colonial power. Fully half of such territorial claims (50.3%) saw at least one militarized dispute over the claim, and nearly one third (30.4%) saw at least one fatal dispute – both more than any other category. The same result holds when the number of conflicts is considered, with same colonizer legacy claims averaging 1.80 conflicts and 0.76 fatal conflicts. This figure for fatal conflict is especially noteworthy because it is more than twice as many conflicts as the

nearest category, which is states with no colonial history; the other types of current or past colonial legacies have even fewer fatal conflicts.

These tables offer preliminary support for Hypothesis 1, which suggested that territorial conflict should be most likely in same-colonizer colonial legacies, and cast doubt on Hypothesis 2's expectation that solidarity between former colonies should reduce conflict. These tables' bivariate analyses were not able to control for the impact of other factors that might plausibly affect conflict behavior, though, so Tables 3 and 4 offer more complete multivariate tests.

[Tables 3 and 4 about here]

We begin by considering the impact of colonial legacies on territorial conflict between neighbors. Tables 3 and 4 present the results of logistic regression analyses of territorial conflict that account for the control variables discussed earlier. Each observation in these tables represents a year during which a territorial claim was ongoing. The goal of these tables is to understand the likelihood that a given pair of countries will become involved in armed conflict over territory (Table 3) or fatal conflict over territory (Table 4), based on the colonial legacy (if any) while controlling for a number of other factors.

Each table includes two models. Model I in each table is the main model, which focuses on the type of colonial legacy and regional effects. Model II in each table replaces the same colonizer legacy dummy variable with the identity of the colonizer in question, to determine whether certain colonizers' legacies were generally more positive or negative than others. Only four colonial powers – the UK, France, Spain, and the Ottoman Empire (a land empire rather than overseas colonial empire) – have enough cases and enough variation in the dependent variable to be able to appear with a separate variable; the remaining colonial powers are combined into an “Other” colonizer legacy.

The results are largely consistent with the preliminary results from Tables 1 and 2. Hypothesis 1 suggested that armed conflict over territory should be more likely in pairs of states that had both been colonized by the same colonial power due to the lack of urgency in settling internal borders, while Hypothesis 2 suggested that such borders should be less conflictual because of the sense of postcolonial solidarity. The results offer much support for Hypothesis 1's expectation of increased conflict than for Hypothesis 2's more optimistic expectation, as same colonizer legacy situations generally see increased territorial conflict. The increase in all armed

conflict over territory, as seen in Table 3, is not statistically significant ( $p < .09$ ), although the increase in fatal conflict in Table 4 is ( $p < .01$ ).

The results for individual empires in Model II show that only borders between two former Spanish colonies are more likely to see conflict overall, and only borders between two Ottoman possessions are more likely to see fatal conflict. Different colonizer legacies do not have a systematic impact on either total or fatal armed conflict, nor do former colonizer dyads where a former colony is competing in a territorial claim against its former colonizer, and only non-fatal armed conflict is more likely when at least one of the claimants sees the territory as a colony or dependency rather than as part of its national homeland.

Turning to possible regional differences, academics have disagreed over the impact of the legal doctrine of *Uti Possidetis* on territorial conflict in the Americas, as well as that doctrine's enshrinement in the OAU Charter and related African documents. These tables include variables indicating territorial claims where *Uti Possidetis* should be expected to have been relevant, for both Latin American and African states. There is some evidence for a pacifying effect of this doctrine in the Western Hemisphere, as territorial claims to borders that should have been covered by the doctrine are significantly less likely to see armed conflict overall in Model II of Table 3 ( $p < .02$ ) and to see fatal conflict in Model I of Table 4 ( $p < .001$ ). The OAU's effort to apply the doctrine in Africa appears to have been unsuccessful, though, as territorial claims between African states are significantly more likely to see both total and fatal conflict in every model ( $p < .01$  or stronger). Even after consider the other types of colonial legacies such as same- or different-colonizer histories or possible colonizer-specific effects, there has been no systematic pacifying effect in Africa, with fourteen different claims between African states producing at least one fatal conflict. At this point, we can conclude mixed support for Hypothesis 3, with some support for a pacifying effect in Latin America but none in Africa.

Overall, these results offer a great deal of insight into the relationship between colonial legacies and territorial conflict. In general, same-colonizer legacies seem to be more dangerous than different-colonizer legacies (or, indeed, than borders between states that were never colonized), suggesting that colonial rulers did not do as good a job of establishing or making borders between their own possessions as they did for the borders between their and other colonizers' possessions. Regional efforts to promote territorial integrity and stability after

independence appear to have been at least partially successful in the Western Hemisphere, but at least based on this preliminary evidence, not in Africa.

### **Case Studies**

We now supplement these quantitative analyses by looking briefly at relevant cases around the world. The goal of this section is to integrate the overall patterns from our quantitative findings with more detailed information about specific cases, to help flesh out the causal mechanisms that are at work and to gain a better understanding of the impact of colonial legacies with respect to territorial conflict.

#### **Colonial Legacy Worsened Territorial Relations with Neighbors**

The first type of colonial legacy that we discussed involved situations where the history of colonial rule seems to have worsened territorial relations between states after their independence. Along these lines, we hypothesized that territorial conflict would be most likely in pairs of states that had both been ruled by the same colonizer. These expectations were generally supported by our quantitative analyses. Fully half of all same-colonizer borders were challenged militarily at least once after independence, and nearly one third of such borders experienced at least one fatal conflict over the territory.

This evidence is generally consistent with the observations of past scholars. Despite the good intentions behind the application of *uti possidetis* in Latin America, the doctrine's application appears to have been plagued by several serious problems (Brownlie 1998: 132-133; Hill 1945: 155; Prescott 1987: 105-106, 199ff; Ratner 1996: 594, 607-608). One issue was that the Spanish had employed a wide variety of administrative units, with different borders often delimiting military, political, and religious entities; several different newly independent states could thus claim possession of the same territory based on inheritance from different Spanish entities. The Spanish often changed the borders of their administrative units over time through seemingly arbitrary royal decrees or *cédulas* from Madrid, raising questions about which state's colonial predecessor actually possessed a given territory under Spanish rule. For example, a Spanish royal order in 1803 transferred the islands of San Andrés and part of the Mosquito Coast from the Captaincy-General of Guatemala (today's Central America) to the Viceroyalty of Santa Fé (today's Colombia). Both Costa Rica and Nicaragua claimed after independence that this

transfer had only referred to military jurisdiction and had not changed political sovereignty (Ireland 1941: 164-165).

Other borders were never clearly marked due to ignorance of local geography, as the entire continent was never completely explored or settled under Spanish rule. For example, the Bolivia-Chile and Bolivia-Paraguay borders were defined only vaguely and incompletely in Spanish documents and maps, allowing each side in these respective territorial claims to argue that its colonial predecessors had explored and administered territory beyond the presumptive border lines that were inherited at independence (Fifer 1972; Ireland 1938: 53-95).

Similar observations can also be made in other regions. The example of India and Pakistan stands out as one where the colonizer's actions either created or worsened a serious territorial problem that has currently lasted more than six decades and shows no signs of ending soon. Before leaving their South Asian colonial possessions, the British decided to partition British India into a majority Muslim state and a majority Hindu state. While most of the leaders of the princely states that made up British India chose to join the postcolonial state that best reflected the religion of their populations, the (Hindu) maharajah of Kashmir hesitated to join either new state, leading to demands and then armed revolt by his majority Muslim constituents. Facing this threat, he then announced Kashmir's accession to India, which has been followed by more than six decades of demands and armed rebellion by the majority Muslim population of Kashmir as well as the Pakistani government. It is not clear that different decisions by the British colonial government would have been able to prevent serious conflict throughout the entire former British India, but a strong argument could be made that the British actions as they were leaving the area did little to manage or settle the potential issues that arose almost immediately upon independence. (Anderson 2000: 165-167; Calvert 2004: 184-197)

Turning from overseas empires to land empires, similar results may be seen in a number of cases within the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Maybe the most visible example in recent history is the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave with a largely Armenian population located within the borders of Azerbaijan. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia came under Soviet rule in the tumultuous days after World War I, and in 1920 the leadership of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic passed Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in a fraternal gesture. Continued ethnic conflict and



Turkish pressure led Joseph Stalin to designate the enclave an autonomous region and transfer it back to Azerbaijan in 1923.

The Soviet authorities were able to maintain general order in the coming decades, but tensions persisted, and the opening of political expression in the mid-1980s led to the renewal of overt conflict over the territory. Armenia began to demand the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenian rule, and the region's local leadership voted in 1988 in favor of such a transfer. The tensions over the region soon led to a series of strikes and demonstrations, which began to escalate to armed conflict. Soviet forces intervened in 1989 to reestablish order in the region, imposing direct rule for a time in 1989 before handing control back to Azerbaijan in November. Armenia declared Nagorno-Karabakh to be part of the Armenian Republic in December of 1989, though, and fighting and ethnic cleansing soon escalated. The Soviets were unable to maintain order in the region, and the breakup of the Soviet Union was followed by further escalation. Tens of thousands have died and hundreds of thousands have been displaced, while Nagorno-Karabakh remains under Armenian rule and repeated multilateral peace initiatives have failed. While Soviet rule over both Armenia and Azerbaijan was able to prevent the outbreak of full-scale fighting over the enclave for some six decades, the multiple transfers of the territory and changes in its status under Soviet rule failed to resolve the issue and instead set the stage for future conflict. And once the Soviet Union broke up and Armenia and Azerbaijan achieved independence, the issue -- which had already been inflamed in recent years -- quickly exploded into full-scale war. (Anderson 2000: 236-238; Calvert 2004: 249-258)

### **Colonial Legacy Improved Territorial Relations with Neighbors**

We also considered the possibility that the history of colonial rule could have improved territorial relations between states after their independence. Among these lines, we hypothesized that territorial conflict should be less likely between former colonies of the same colonizer. The evidence turns out to be mixed. Where a colonial border divided the possessions of two different colonizers, postcolonial relations were not systematically more or less conflictual than borders that never experienced colonial rule. The expectation of greater solidarity between former colonies of the same colonial power was definitely not supported, though.

Turning to other research, there is some suggestion that *uti possidetis* and similar doctrines were responsible for the general avoidance of territorial conflict in the Americas and

Africa, even if (as noted above) several scholars see the application of these doctrines as having been plagued by numerous flaws. Zacher (2001: 229) argues that the principle of *uti possidetis* “had some impact in promoting greater order” in Latin America, although it was not always respected by every country in the region, and Malanczuk (1997: 162-163) notes that most newly independent states have accepted this general principle of the inheritance of colonial borders. Domínguez et al. (2003: 21) argue that “Given immense geographic spaces, seemingly insurmountable barriers such as the Andean mountains or the extensive dense tropical forests that filled much of Central and South America, state leaders with limited resources found it cost-effective to honor and rely on *uti possidetis* to address most border issues,” and that while interstate war frequently occurred in postcolonial Central and South America, “*Uti possidetis juris* held successfully over time, with six exceptions, the last of which occurred in 1941.” Kacowicz (1995: 270; see also Kacowicz 1994: 227-228) suggests that -- while there have been a few wars or near-wars in the region -- “the vast majority of border disputes in South America have been resolved peacefully, leading to some cession or exchange of territories. The basis for a peaceful settlement of those disputes was established through the principle of *uti possidetis*, according to which the Latin American countries recognized the colonial borders as their post-independence international frontiers.” This study's analyses are consistent with this; territorial conflict turns out to have been less likely in the Western Hemisphere than would otherwise have been expected, particularly with respect to fatal conflict.

Turning to Africa, Kacowicz (1995: 271) and Zacher (2001: 229) conclude that African borders -- particularly in West Africa -- have generally been respected, in line with *uti possidetis*. Yet there is evidence that the application of *uti possidetis* in Latin America was plagued with problems, as noted above, and other scholars are skeptical of related efforts in Africa. For example, Prescott (1987: 105) notes that the 1964 OAU declaration was meant to prevent the emergence of territorial disputes in Africa, but concludes that “Unfortunately, it has not succeeded in that intention.” Our analyses have found little evidence that territorial conflict has been less likely, either in Africa or between former French colonies.

Moving beyond armed conflict for the moment, it is worth noting that many of the territorial cases that have been submitted to the International Court of Justice involve shared colonial legacies. A brief glance through the list of contentious ICJ cases identifies nineteen that

have involved territorial issues.<sup>6</sup> Of these, nine involved two states that had both been colonies of the same colonizer, most notably pairs of former Spanish colonies in Latin America or former French colonies in West Africa. Another five involved two states that had been ruled by different colonizers or empires, and the remaining five included at least one state that was a colonizer rather than a colony of another state; none of these territorial cases involved a colonizer and one of its former colonies. These numbers suggest an important pattern when considered in context, using the numbers from Table 1 to identify the number of shared borders or colonizer-colony relationships that potentially could have taken a territorial issue to the ICJ. The nine ICJ cases with a same-colonizer legacy come from a set of 165 territorial claims with such a legacy, so 5.5% of these claims were settled by reference to the court. The five cases with a different-colonizer legacy come from a set of 101 claims, so 5.0% of claims -- barely half of the probability for same-colonizer legacies -- were ended the court; none of the 75 territorial claims in former colonizer-colony relationships has yet been submitted to the ICJ. By no means does this offer definitive proof that the legacy of colonial rule increases states' willingness to settle their territorial issues peacefully through adjudication (which would be another implication of the colonial solidarity argument discussed above), but it is certainly consistent with this suggestion. Future research should do more to investigate the impact of colonial legacies on peaceful conflict management, as well as on armed conflict itself.

### **Discussion**

This project has been a preliminary effort to investigate the impact of colonial legacies on territorial claims between independent nation-states. We began by discussing both positive and negative types of legacies that might be at work, and by presenting a series of hypotheses about the conditions under which each type of legacy should be most likely. These hypotheses were tested through quantitative analyses of territorial conflict over the past two centuries. Overall, these analyses generally offer support for the idea that colonial legacies can have an important impact, and that our approach in this project has a great deal of potential for understanding these

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<sup>6</sup> The list of cases is at <<http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/index.php?p1=3&p2=3>>. This figure of nineteen territorial cases excludes another nineteen that exclusively involved sovereignty over maritime zones (with no mainland or island territory at stake) or the use of cross-border rivers.

legacies. These analyses suggest that the common tendency to refer to "colonial legacies" or to the "colonial origins of today's problems" may have a basis in fact.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that processes and decisions in international relations are influenced by events in the distant past. While international relations scholars have frequently focused on the impact of recent events such as armed conflicts or war, this study's results show that events several centuries ago -- indeed, long before the modern state became independent -- can also have a strong and systematic effect. This is also consistent with a variety of work on other potential influences of colonialism, which has found important connections between colonial histories and political or economic conditions within postcolonial states.

This project has produced some very useful insights into the role of colonial legacies with respect to territorial conflict, but it has not produced definitive answers regarding every aspect of colonial legacies. Many interesting and important questions remain to be addressed in future research. One area for further development is a more detailed examination of individual cases of borders or other claimed territories, which will allow us to gain a much clearer understanding of how these colonial legacies work. Quantitative analyses such as those presented in this project are very useful for identifying important patterns and relationships, but case studies offer a better chance to investigate the specific processes at work in these general patterns.

In particular, more attention should be focused on specific events during the colonial era as influences on territorial stability after independence. In the preliminary analyses reported here, we have used broad categories to measure the colonial legacy -- most notably whether two states shared the same or different colonizers. Our theoretical discussion of the different types of colonial legacies suggests that much more may be at work, though, and our brief discussion of several prominent cases was consistent with this. For example, while the broad types of colonial legacy compared here may be important, it may be at least as important to investigate the status of each border when the colonial era ended (such as whether the border had been settled to both sides' satisfaction, mapped clearly and accurately, and marked accurately on the ground). Borders with a history of conflict or changing possession during the colonial era may be more likely to lead to post-independence challenges, as one or both new states may seek to reverse past losses and regain previously held territory after independence; the same may also be true for colonially imposed borders that separate members of tribal, ethnic, or other identity groups or otherwise seem to set the stage for post-independence conflict. The impact of colonial history

after independence may also depend on the length of colonial rule (whereby a longer colonial period means a greater opportunity for the colonizer's actions to affect subsequent events) or on the details of how the colonies were run (e.g., with settlement-oriented colonies being run very differently from colonies that were used primarily for resource extraction).

This study's quantitative analyses may also missed important temporal or regional effects. This paper's models distinguished between the British, French, Spanish, and Ottoman empires, and between the geographic regions where *Uti Possidetis* should have applied. This may have obscured important differences between, say, French colonies in Southeast Asia and in West Africa, or between British colonies in Africa and in South Asia. It is notable that several authors have credited French West Africa with being a zone of peace or territorial stability (e.g., Kacowicz 1998; Kornprobst 2002), which does not show up in this study's general comparisons across all French colonies or all African territorial claims. Further research would benefit from considering such distinctions in greater detail.

Finally, this paper has focused only on armed conflict between former colonies, and colonial legacies may have had other systematic effects unrelated to conflict. If the argument about colonial legacies improving relations after independence is correct, then we might expect to see states that shared a colonial legacy being more likely to resolve any post-independence territorial claims quickly and peacefully. Such peaceful settlements might be expected to occur through bilateral negotiations, or if those should be unsuccessful, through the mediation of the former colonizer or through other third party techniques. Peaceful claim management and ending would be a productive topic for research following up on this paper.

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**Table 1: Colonial Legacies and Likelihood of Armed Conflict in Territorial Claims**

*At Least One Territorial Conflict:*

<u>Type of Relationship</u>	Any Conflict		Fatal Conflict	
	None	One or More (%)	None	One or More (%)
Neither state colonized:	117	80 (40.6%)	151	46 (23.4%)
Same colonizer legacy:	82	83 (50.3)	114	51 (30.9)
Different colonizer legacy:	60	41 (40.6)	83	18 (17.8)
Former colonizer dyad:	41	34 (45.3)	61	14 (18.7)
Current colonial dyad:	198	108 (35.3)	256	50 (16.3)
<i>Total:</i>	<i>498</i>	<i>346 (41.0)</i>	<i>665</i>	<i>179 (21.2)</i>
	$X^2 = 10.63$ (4 df, $p < .04$ )		$X^2 = 15.16$ (4 df, $p < .01$ )	

**Table 2: Colonial Legacies and Armed Conflicts in Territorial Claims**

*Average Number of Territorial Conflicts in Claim:*

<u>Type of Relationship</u>	Any Conflicts		Fatal Conflicts	N
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Neither state colonized:	0.84 (2.03)	0.32 (0.79)		197
Same colonizer legacy:	1.80 (3.99)	0.76 (2.04)		165
Different colonizer legacy:	0.93 (1.69)	0.23 (0.56)		101
Former colonizer dyad:	1.04 (2.14)	0.24 (0.54)		75
Current colonial dyad:	0.71 (1.57)	0.24 (0.79)		306
<i>Total:</i>	<i>1.01 (2.42)</i>	<i>0.36 (1.13)</i>		<i>844</i>
	$F = 5.97$ ( $p < .001$ ) 843 d.f. (4/839)		$F = 6.69$ ( $p < .001$ ) 843 d.f. (4/839)	

**Table 3: Accounting for Territorial Conflict**

Variable	Model I:	Model II:
	Main model	Colonizer effects
<i>Colonial Legacies</i>		
Same colonizer legacy:	0.18 (0.11)	--
United Kingdom	--	0.08 (0.19)
France	--	0.20 (0.31)
Spain	--	0.95 (0.36)**
Ottoman Empire	--	0.23 (0.18)
Other	--	- 0.14 (0.27)
Different colonizer legacy:	- 0.03 (0.15)	0.09 (0.16)
Former colonizer dyad:	0.20 (0.15)	0.20 (0.15)
Current colonial dyad:	0.26 (0.12)*	0.27 (0.12)**
<i>Uti Possidetis</i>		
Latin American states	- 0.05 (0.13)	- 0.73 (0.34)*
African states	0.50 (0.16)**	0.47 (0.18)**
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Claim salience	0.15 (0.02)**	0.15 (0.02)**
Recent conflict over claim	0.52 (0.03)**	0.52 (0.03)**
Contiguity to territory	0.21 (0.10)*	0.22 (0.10)*
Capabilities (stronger side)	- 0.95 (0.26)**	- 0.88 (0.26)**
Joint democracy	- 0.64 (0.17)**	- 0.63 (0.17)**
Constant	- 3.81 (0.30)**	- 3.88 (0.31)**
	N=13,673	N=13,673
	X <sup>2</sup> =634.41	X <sup>2</sup> =618.93
	(11 df, p<.001)	(15 df, p<.001)

*Notes*

\*\*p<.01, \*p<.05 (1 tailed; robust standard errors in parentheses)

**Table 4: Accounting for Fatal Territorial Conflict**

Variable	Model I:	Model II:
	Main model	Colonizer effects
<i>Colonial Legacies</i>		
Same colonizer legacy:	0.45 (0.18)**	--
United Kingdom	--	0.43 (0.27)
France	--	- 0.13 (0.46)
Spain	--	0.32 (0.71)
Ottoman Empire	--	0.63 (0.21)**
Other	--	0.25 (0.33)
Different colonizer legacy:	- 0.37 (0.25)	- 0.43 (0.28)
Former colonizer dyad:	- 0.20 (0.27)	- 0.18 (0.27)
Current colonial dyad:	0.19 (0.18)	0.17 (0.18)
<i>Uti Possidetis</i>		
Latin American states	- 0.82 (0.24)**	- 0.72 (0.67)
African states	0.56 (0.22)**	0.72 (0.26)**
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Claim salience	0.18 (0.03)**	0.17 (0.03)**
Recent fatal conflict	0.54 (0.06)**	0.54 (0.06)**
Contiguity to territory	0.95 (0.22)**	0.95 (0.22)**
Capabilities (stronger side)	- 0.92 (0.37)*	- 1.01 (0.38)**
Joint democracy	- 0.90 (0.31)**	- 0.92 (0.31)**
Constant	- 5.43 (0.46)**	- 5.32 (0.47)**
	N=13,673	N=13,673
	X <sup>2</sup> =368.83	X <sup>2</sup> =374.82
	(11 df, p<.001)	(15 df, p<.001)

*Notes*

\*\*p<.01, \*p<.05 (1 tailed; robust standard errors in parentheses)