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Escalatory Effects of Domestic Politics in International Crises

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Draft of Presentation

1. Introduction

Today, I'd like to talk about escalatory effects of domestic politics in international crises. You can imagine two types of the crises, which are economic crises and militarized crises, but my focus is on militarized ones.

In the studies of militarized international disputes, the interaction between international politics and domestic politics is major issue. By using game-theoretical models, recent literature suggests that democratic political institutions facilitate signaling the states' unwavering resolve for expected war by public threats of using force. This leads to backing down on the part of adversaries, and then to peaceful settlement of crises.

In contrast to this prediction of theoretical analyses, however, leaders facing with crises not only issue threats to use of force, but also often take measures such as arms buildups, troop mobilizations, and deployments to the potential zone of operations. Moreover, some crises seem to escalate into war precisely because of these military actions. These facts present puzzles: Why do state leaders take actions that increase the likelihood of war in international crises? When and why do governments rationally decide to wage war on their own?

As one of the possible answers to these puzzles, I argue that in international crises, leaders take more actions due to the need to increase domestic support than what are necessary from crisis bargaining at the international level. This increases the probability of war. To demonstrate this argument, the remaining parts of my presentation are organized as follows. First, I will examine conventional literature. There are two sets of arguments related to my research, which are

audience costs model and domestic opposition model. After briefly reviewing these models, I will then point to some problems of them. Second, I will explain the mechanisms of my argument. In that part, I will try to deduce my argument from the knowledge of existing theoretical and empirical studies rather than construct fully new model. And finally, to illustrate the logic of my argument, I will analyze the Persian Gulf Crisis, 1990-1991. As discussed later, this crisis is a counterexample to conventional literature, but the mechanisms of my argument instead worked within the decision-making process of the U.S. government.

2. Conventional Literature: Review and Problems

Let me begin by reviewing previous research. Recent studies of international disputes stylize an international crisis as a bargaining process among two states, both of which want to get better deals than others. In this crisis bargaining, state leaders need to send credible signals about their resolve for war, thereby overcoming informational asymmetries that lead to war. Given these settings, conventional literature suggests that leaders in democracies can meet their demands with public threats to use military force. There are two influential models regarding the effect of domestic politics on state behavior in crises.

The first one is audience-costs model. Because Professor Tomz clearly explained just before, I think you've got the idea of this model (, so I do not mean to repeat that). Audience costs are the political price that state leaders should pay when withdrawing from threats. Leaders do not want accept these costs, and then they have strong incentives to carry through on their threats once issued publicly in such forms as official statements and remarks by presidents. This story is based on political accountability, which is one of the key characteristics of democracies.

On the other hand, the second model focuses on public contestations. In democracies, opposition parties can freely, not be forced, to choose their policy stance. According to the model, this feature of the political institution has two effects on governments' behavior. First, opposition parties can lend additional credibility on governments' threats by publicly expressing support for them. Second, state leaders are forced to selectively issue threats. In other words, they cannot engage in bluffing behavior because the oppositions can reveal the low resolve on the part of governments by publicly resisting threats.

As I indicated at the beginning of this presentation, these models have the following problems. First, the common view that leaders do better by public statements in crisis bargaining is derived by focusing exclusively on the signaling role of democratic institutions at the international level. In other words, audience costs model overlooks or ignores the effect of domestic support on governments' behavior and the costs of expected war, so that it only gives us partial pictures of domestic politics in crises.

Second, domestic opposition model tries to address this problem by examining the influence of opposition parties' support on the credibility of threats. However, its story seems to be based on empirically invalid assumption that opposition parties can accurately observe governments' resolve for war. Consequently, the governments in this model have no chance to move against the dissent by domestic oppositions. In reality, the interactions among them are more complicated; for example, leaders often approach opposition parties to garner their support, and then some members of oppositions may change their policy stance. To sum up these two problems, there are significant gaps between theory and practice.

3. Mechanisms: Domestic Politics and Crisis Escalation

To bridge these gaps, this paper focuses on the dynamic nature of domestic support for governments and/or their crisis policies. In this section, I'd like to explain the mechanisms of the relationship between domestic politics and crisis escalation. Before getting into the details, let me restate my argument: in international crises, leaders take more actions due to the need to increase domestic support than what are necessary from crisis bargaining at the international level. This increases the probability of war.

The logic of this argument is as follows. To begin with, leaders facing with crises need to shore up domestic support for their policy. Although there are probably many goals which they pursue, I assume that politicians place primary importance on their political survival according to conventional models in political science. To keep staying in office, governments strive to gain public support. Furthermore, it is natural that state leaders should address national unity to signal their resolve to the adversaries.

Next, to gain the backing of public opinion, leaders have to signal their high resolve to domestic audiences, let alone international audiences, because opposition parties and citizens do

not know governments' determination. This point is the main difference from previous crisis bargaining literature. In contrast to existing models, I assume informational asymmetry between the leaders and the people. One possible measure for *domestic* signaling is military actions, which do not mean actual use of force. In addition, state leaders try to stress higher levels of danger. These somewhat hawkish behaviors are sometimes valued as leaders' competence by voters.

Finally, these actions heighten the likelihood of war in two ways. On one hand, increases in the level of support for governments decrease domestic political costs in case of war. As previous studies suggest, leaders may be punished domestically by waging unwarranted war. On the other hand, preparedness for fighting by troop deployments enhances the possibility of victory. These effects limit the course of actions for leaders, so that states are sometimes locked in war. This logic is best illustrated by the Persian Gulf Crisis, 1990-1991.

4. Case study: the Persian Gulf Crisis, 1990-1991

The Persian Gulf Crisis happened when Iraq invaded the territory of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. The United States and its allies repeatedly demanded unconditional withdrawal of Saddam Hussein of Iraq by official statements and UN Security Council resolutions. Despite the intensive diplomatic efforts for peaceful settlement, unfortunately, the First Gulf War broke out on January 17, 1991.

According to the predictions of conventional literature, this crisis would not have escalated to war. For example, Fearon, a student of audience costs, says in his seminal works that the then President of the United States, George H. W. Bush was able to signal his unwavering resolve by public statements. The prominent example was that Bush said on August 5, at the very beginning of this crisis, "This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." If Fearon's interpretation were true, however, we might not look back on this event like this. Actually, the U.S. government not only issued public threats, but also took additional actions as my argument suggests. This is the reason why the Persian Gulf Crisis requires further examination.

In this crisis, the leaders of the U.S. felt the need of domestic support for taking "last resort." The then Secretary of State, James A. Baker, said in his memoirs, "Realistically, we couldn't have used force in the face of explicit congressional disapproval" (Baker 1995, 337). Therefore,

Bush asked for public support by televised speeches or letters to Congress, and he met with the Congressional leaders at so many times. In addition, the leaders also feared for the domestic political costs of unsupported war. Baker believed that "sending hundreds of thousands of soldiers into battle, with the possibility of significant casualties, but *without* legislative imprimatur, could well prove to be a Pyrrhic victory" (Baker 1995, p.334; emphasis in original). Moreover, even when the level of domestic support was sufficiently high, Bush was anxious for support. He wrote in his diary on Sep 11, 1990 that "I am pleased with the amount of support that I'm getting, but I know it can change" (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 370). This means that Bush understood the dynamics of domestic support.

The view of the commander in chief was absolutely correct. As Figure 1 shows, the approval ratings of Bush fluctuated during the crisis. A broken line in this figure plots Gallup's poll results from August 3-4, 1990 to January 16, 1991. Although there are many ups and downs in the ratings, we can see three boost phases: early in August 1990, the end of November 1990, and mid-January 1991. In each period, the Bush administration took actions to gain the domestic support.

Figure 1: Approval ratings of Bush handling the Gulf (Gallup)
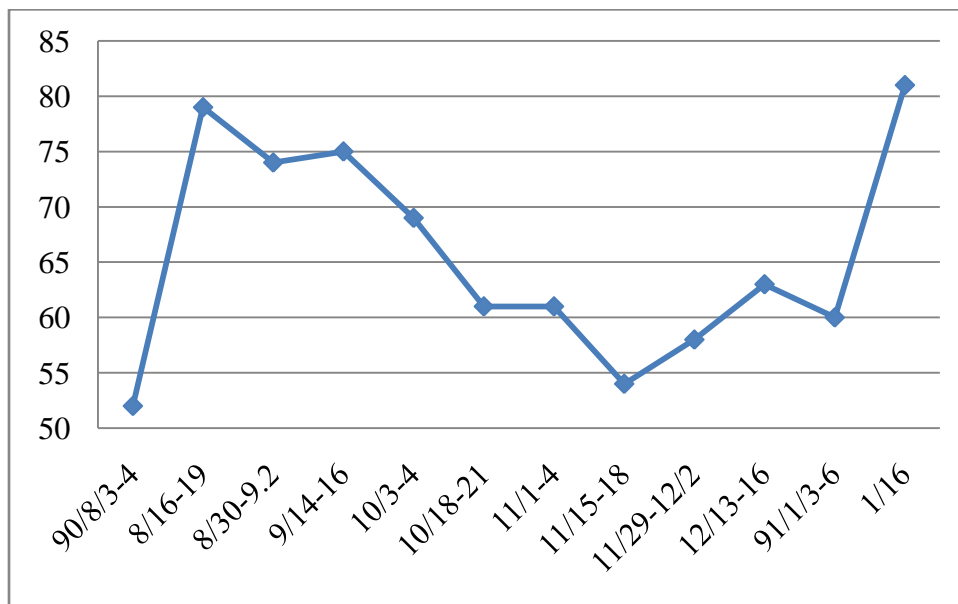
First, on Aug 8, 1990, Bush announced the deployments of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia. As he prepared this speech, he tried to stress the danger of the crisis. He said, "I tightened up the

language to strengthen the similarity I saw between the Persian Gulf and the situation in the Rhineland in the 1930s, when Hitler simply defied the Treaty of Versailles and marched in" (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 370). After this announcement of "Desert Shield", the approval ratings drastically surged: from 52 (August 3-4) to 77 percent (August 9-10).

Second, on Nov 29 1990, the United Nations Security Council authorized using force against Iraq by the U.S. and its allies, and set the January 15 withdrawal deadline for Iraq troops. This Resolution 678 was definitely an ultimatum, which could escalate a risk of war. UN resolutions are, of course, not purely the U.S. actions. However, in the Gulf Crisis, the U.S. government considered that their "diplomatic offensive at the United Nations was a critical component in winning over reluctant Congress" (Baker 1995, 332). Actually, Democrats, the opposition party, welcomed the multilateral measure of the government, and then the level of domestic support increased from 54 (November 15-18) to 60 percent (December 6-7).

Finally, because of the intensive approaches to the Democratic Party, the government got the congressional approval for using the U.S. troops on Jan 12 1991. The increase in the approval for Bush was accelerated. On Jan 16 1991, the domestic support reached its highest level during the crisis: 81 percent. Baker said in retrospect, "All that remained, regrettably, was for us to wield it" (Baker 1995, 344). This statement illuminates that the government became locked in war at some time or other, although it is difficult to identify specific date.

5. Conclusion

Why do state leaders take actions that increase the likelihood of war in international crises, and decide to wage war on their own? My answer to this question is a kind of paradox. As the case study of the Persian Gulf Crisis shows, leaders take risky actions to increase domestic support for their crisis policy, which, in the end, limits their policy options. Moreover, as state leaders exhaust peaceful or diplomatic measures which they prefer to war, they are impelled to use force. The point is that this within-state mechanism of war outbreak can work independently of crisis bargaining at the international level. These findings suggest that we must rethink about and accurately model the monadic effects of domestic politics on state's behavior in crises by intentionally stepping back from bilateral models.