

## [ISSF Article Review 107 on Tobias Theiler. “The Microfoundations of Diversionary Conflict.”](#)

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## Article Review 107

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**Tobias Theiler. “The Microfoundations of Diversionary Conflict.”** *Security Studies* 27:2 (2018): 318-343. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1386941>.

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**T**he theory of diversionary war posits that domestic turmoil creates incentives for leaders to distract their publics by initiating conflict abroad. The canonical example of such behavior is the Falklands/Malvinas War of 1982 between Argentina and England, a conflict initiated by Argentina’s military junta while in the grip of an economic crisis, and which ultimately resulted in the junta’s demise when England defeated Argentina. The foundations of diversionary war theory rest on the conflict-cohesion hypothesis in sociology, which states that conflict with an outside group can promote cohesiveness within a group and increase support for the group’s leader. Aware of this phenomenon, insecure leaders can stir up these feelings by initiating conflict in order to preserve their reign. As the sixteenth-century political philosopher Jean Bodin put it, “[T]he best way of preserving a state and guaranteeing it against sedition, rebellion, and civil war is to keep the subjects in amity with

one another, and to this end, to find an enemy against whom they can make common cause.”<sup>11</sup>

In this article, Tobias Theiler explores the processes that underlie the conflict-cohesion hypothesis and explains why and how conflict initiation generates the rally effect. The central puzzle is why, if wars are costly in both human and material terms, the public support would the bellicose actions of an insecure leader. What is more, a leader does not bear the costs of war; the public does. In addition, war outcomes are uncertain, and carry the potential of inflicting short- and long-term pain and suffering.

Drawing on social identity theory (SIT) from social psychology, he argues that outgroup conflict can engender stronger feelings of identity within members of the ingroup. This, in turn, results in stronger support for leaders of the ingroup. However, this effect depends on two factors: (1) target selection and framing of the conflict, and (2) the extent to which leaders can become “fused” to their groups. Theiler tests his argument with a case study of the 2014 Crimea conflict.

His contribution is twofold. First, it provides an explanation for how and why the public would support a leader’s diversionary actions. Second, it highlights the value of careful case studies in tracing the causal processes specified by a theory. What is more, in devoting attention to these mechanisms, the analysis reveals implications that merit further study toward a better understanding of diversionary conflict.

Social identity theory (SIT) claims that “people have an intrinsic need to form groups and to identify with them, and that this influences how they perceive and act inside groups and across group boundaries” (322). The key aspect of SIT that is relevant to Theiler’s argument is the assumption that groups can be “objects of emotion” (323). One need not be directly affected by an event to experience the emotions of one’s group. Furthermore, the stronger one’s group identity, the stronger these group-based emotions. Conflict, in particular, makes group emotions more salient and intense. When this occurs, these emotions can consume group members to the point where a member’s individual identity is essentially that of the group. Consequently, a shrewd leader, by appropriating and twisting the norms and symbols of the group and initiating conflict strategically, can become the embodiment of the group. Group cohesion, in turn, translates to blind support for the leader. However, as Theiler describes, the extent to which leaders can successfully “fuse” themselves to their groups depends on two conditions (329).

The first condition is target selection, the ingroup’s perceptions of the target, and how the leader frames the impending conflict. Leaders who seek to rally their supporters must successfully invoke negative feelings of fear, disgust, and hatred toward the target outgroup. This, however, is not sufficient. Leaders must further stoke these feelings by portraying the outgroup as an immediate threat. Here, existing stereotypes and hasty

generalizations provide leaders with a low-hanging fruit. Finally, since fear can paralyze or mobilize, diversionary leaders must tread a thin line in presenting a target that is credible enough to pose a sufficient yet manageable threat. Too weak a target lessens the immediate threat and will fail to mobilize support. With too strong a target, however, fear turns to despair, resulting in similar reduced levels of support. This comports with quantitative work that focuses on the targets of diversionary action.<sup>[2]</sup>

The second scope condition relates to how leaders cast themselves as inspirational and benevolent figures during a conflict in order to rally the masses. Typical strategies include televised meetings with wounded soldiers and their families, pinning medals on uniforms, and delivering speeches behind podiums far away from the battlefield. Successful leaders are careful to frame conflicts to turn negative emotions into positive ones and to portray themselves as the fount of wisdom and foresight and the righteous deliverers of justice.

Theiler tests two hypotheses with the 2014 Crimea conflict: (H1) “conflict with an outgroup can cause people to identify more strongly with the ingroup,” and (H2) “where group attachments strengthen, these can become channeled toward the leader and boost his or her popularity” (332). On the surface, these hypotheses can just as easily be derived from the conflict-cohesion hypothesis. However, the value in Theiler’s analysis lies in his emphasis on the mechanisms that led to greater group identification among Russians amidst worsening perceptions of Ukraine and the West (H1), and the popularity of the Crimea conflict alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin’s boost in approval ratings (H2).

Several years prior to the Crimea conflict, and following an uncharacteristically poor showing in the 2011 elections, Russian President Vladimir Putin, with the backing of a friendly mass media and pro-government youth and civil groups, embarked on a campaign to rekindle the spirit of Russia with “an eclectic mix of rhetoric, symbolic gestures, and policy initiatives.” At the same time, he clamped down on media freedom to ensure that the Russian public was fed an appropriate information diet where he (Putin) was the main course, and the “defender and protector of the nation” (334).

Crimea, a Russian-speaking territory that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had ceded to Ukraine, made an ideal target for Putin to unify the nation. First, Crimea represented a loss of what was once Russian territory. As Jaroslav Tir shows, territorial conflicts resonate well with mass publics for the rather prosaic reason that human beings, despite being far removed from their hunter-gatherer ancestors, still value land above all else and are willing to shed blood to reclaim soil.<sup>[3]</sup> Second, as Theiler argues, democracy protests in the winter of 2013-2014 provided the fodder on which to construct a narrative of the West’s insidious intentions to make Ukraine into a client state.

In late February 2014, Russian troops without insignia marched into Crimea amidst pro-

Russian demonstrations, and in a matter of weeks, Crimea voted to join the Russian Federation. As the West moved to impose sanctions on Russia, Putin took to the microphone in a televised address and spoke in tones of righteous resentment and stirring nationalism, rousing the same long-held emotions in the masses (337-338).

With both scope conditions satisfied, the Crimea conflict proved immensely popular: “89 percent of Russians welcomed Crimea’s return to Russia” (338). Russian self-perception improved as well, from 29 percent in the spring of 2013 to 63 percent in the summer of 2015, as tensions mounted between Russia and the West. Putin enjoyed a sustained boost in popularity, from 61 percent prior to the conflict to 88 percent in late 2014 (338-339).

However, SIT seems capable of explaining not just the boost in leader approval ratings and national cohesion in the aftermath of diversionary conflict, but any international conflict, be it military or economic (to be clear, Theiler does not make this claim). In this regard, what Theiler has proposed here is not merely the microfoundations of diversionary conflict, but could potentially be the psychological foundations of conflict writ large. For instance, he notes that both U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama had no diversionary motives, yet both enjoyed a boost in approval from their responses to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden respectively. What is more, both presidents struck similar chords in their addresses to the nation and acted as competent leaders who channeled negative emotions into positive ones (331).

At the same time, SIT has weakness as an explanation for why the public would support any military or economic conflict in the absence of a diversionary motive. Nations are aggregates of multiple groups, and applying SIT to nations implicitly assumes a single national identity that subsumes all other group identities. The extent to which this is true is an empirical matter. For instance, there may be opposition to the use of force, and opposition leaders may appeal to a national identity that differs from that of the incumbent. In this case, which group identities are ‘activated,’ and how does conflict affect these identities?

The choice of the Crimea conflict, while illuminating, raises questions as well. Given the widely held—but certainly not universal—belief that the diversionary incentive arises from domestic turmoil and a gamble for resurrection on the part of insecure leaders, it is not clear that Putin had a diversionary motive in 2014. His domestic troubles occurred three years earlier in 2011. Why did it take three years after United Russia’s loss of 77 parliamentary seats for Putin to reclaim Crimea?

Finally, it would be worthwhile and exciting to assess the article’s theory using the universe of diversionary conflict cases within a specific time period, say post-1989. I have in mind case vignettes rather than full-length case studies that focus on whether the scope

conditions Theiler identifies are present, and how they affect public support and leader survival.<sup>[4]</sup>

These concerns notwithstanding, Theiler's article is a timely contribution to the study of diversionary conflict. The insights here not only improve our understanding of why and how mass publics would support belligerent leaders whose actions might carry negative consequences, but are also a stark warning about the potential consequences of the recent rise of identity politics and leaders who seek to present themselves as 'The One.'

What is more, Theiler's contribution extends beyond a closer examination of the conflict-cohesion hypothesis. Peppered throughout the article are auxiliary hypotheses that he derives from theory but does not otherwise test in the interest of keeping the article focused. This is a valuable and exemplary practice. For instance, Theiler suggests that the extent to which leaders can successfully embody their groups depends on the political institutions within which they operate. As such, authoritarian leaders, especially in personalist regimes, have more opportunities and may face greater incentives to initiate conflict. Existing work on the authoritarian propensity to use diversionary force focus more on how institutions constrain rulers and the reactions of domestic audiences than rulers' ability to manipulate their audiences.<sup>[5]</sup> This is a fruitful area of inquiry.

In addition, Theiler reminds us that there is institutional variation in democracies. The institutional differences among presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential democracies affect the degree of separation between political power and the symbols of national identity (327). This subsequently influences the extent to which leaders can portray themselves as personifications of their nations. That struggling leaders of presidential democracies are more prone to external conflict suggests the plausibility of this explanation.

Furthermore, Theiler correctly notes that the effects of the two scope conditions discussed above can mutually reinforce or attenuate each other, and that these group-based emotions, once unleashed, "can create their own dynamics or spirals of action and reaction" (331). He suggests that this interaction effect may explain why democracies tend to avoid selecting democratic targets, and once again, provides a direction for future research.

Despite its intuitiveness, the diversionary hypothesis has yet to amass sufficient evidence to resolve the concerns raised by international relations scholars. In his detailed survey and trenchant critique of the state of diversionary war scholarship, Jack Levy writes, "[L]ittle attention is given to questions of under what kinds of conditions what kinds of states resort to what kinds of external conflict in response to what kinds of threats to the security of political elites."<sup>[6]</sup> By paying close attention to the dynamics and processes in the leader-group relationship, Theiler addresses a part of this critique and provides a piece of the puzzle that is diversionary conflict.

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## Notes

[1] Jean Bodin, "The State's Need of Armed Force to Protect its Interests" [1576], in Evan Luard, ed., *Basic Texts in International Relations: The Evolution of Ideas about International Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan: 1992), 136-139.

[2] Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Clayton L. Thyne. "Contentious Issues as Opportunities for Diversionary Behavior." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 27:5 (2010): 937-961; Sung Chul Jung, "Searching for Non-Aggressive Targets: Which States Attract Diversionary Actions?" *Journal of Peace Research* 51:6 (2014): 755-766.

[3] Jaroslav Tir, "Territorial Diversion: Diversionary Theory of War and Territorial Conflict." *Journal of Politics* 72:2 (2010): 413-425.

[4] See, for instance, Stephan M. Haggard, Robert R. Kaufman, and Terence K. Teo. "Distributive Conflict and Regime Change: A Qualitative Dataset" (2016), <http://assets.press.princeton.edu/releases/m10879.pdf>.

[5] Brian Lai and Dan Slater, "Institutions of the Offensive: Domestic Sources of Dispute Initiation in Authoritarian Regimes, 1950-1992." *American Journal of Political Science* 50:1 (2006): 113-126; Jeffrey Pickering and Emizet F. Kisangani, "Diversionary Despots? Compartmenting Autocracies' Propensity to Use and to Benefit from Military Force." *American Journal of Political Science* 54:2 (2010): 477-493; Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict." *American Political Science Review* 106:2 (2012): 326-347.

[6] Jack S. Levy. "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique." In *Handbook of War Studies*, 1st Edition (Manus I. Midlarsky (ed)). (Routledge Revivals 1989), 283