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# Multilateralism, Major Powers, and Militarized Disputes

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American foreign policy has been animated by public debate between multilateralism and unilateralism in recent years. Some strains of traditional realist thinking suggest that major powers like the U.S. will naturally tend to be less enamored of multilateral action precisely because they possess the capabilities to engage a wider range of unilateral options and they face fewer structural limitations than other states. We empirically investigate this intriguing potential connection between major power status and multilateralism through the lens of interstate conflict. Using Keohane's (1990) definition of multilateralism as coordination among three or more states, we analyze states' propensity to participate multilaterally in militarized disputes. Contrary to expectations, we find that major powers are substantially more prone toward multilateral participation than other states. These results prove to be highly robust in the face of a number of potentially confounding factors and over time.

Public debate on American foreign policy is said to be dominated by two contentious issues. One of these, the longstanding struggle between isolationism and internationalism, has for now largely subsided in favor of the latter, particularly following the events of September 11, 2001. As a consequence of America's prevailing internationalist spirit, the equally truculent debate between multilateralism and unilateralism has now moved center stage (e.g., Kagan 2003; Prestowitz 2003; Nye 2002; Patrick and Forman 2002). Are American interests best served by cooperating with other countries or by "going it alone"?

The unprecedented degree of international cooperation observed during the 1991 Persian Gulf War revitalized interest in and hopes for multilateralism. Many analysts predicted that in the post-Cold War era, states' foreign policy will be characterized by a greater degree of multilateralism (Ruggie 1992). The failure or limited success of successive multilateral initiatives—such as, operation "Restore Hope" in Somalia and the Bosnia peacekeeping mission—and a renewed tendency on the part of the United States to prefer bilateral negotiations in the economic and security arena somewhat dampened early enthusiasms (Martin 1992; Stoll 1998). More recent choices by the United States—ranging from withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol and other multilateral treaties to military action in Iraq—have led foreign leaders to voice their resentment against the arrogance of the country's unilateralist stance (see, for instance, Nye 2002; Wallace 2002).

The United States' apparent proclivity to privilege unilateral action or limited bilateralism seems to reinforce the widespread conviction that great powers are more likely to act unilaterally on the international stage. This view is based on the observation that, given their greater capabilities and potential for action, great powers enjoy a wider range of options and face fewer structural constraints (Waltz 1979;

Patrick 2002). The logic of this argument is that is that they are more prone to act alone because they have the opportunity to do so. However, the relationship between major power status and international multilateral behavior has not received adequate attention in international relations. The issue of multilateralism has been treated, to a large extent, as a question tangential to the larger problem of inter-state cooperation. As a result, the discipline of international relations lacks any "off-the-shelf" theory for explaining multilateralism (Caporaso 1992: 604). The absence of a theory of multilateralism is accompanied by relative scarcity of systematic evidence concerning the relative propensity of major power states to act in coordination with other states.

This article addresses the question of whether major power status affects the tendency of states to act multilaterally by looking at instances of collective participation in militarized interstate disputes (MIDs). Because great powers have a larger number of strategic and economic interests and greater capacity for projection, they tend to become involved in a larger number of international disputes than less powerful states (Siverson and Starr 1990; Enterline 1999). Yet, the nature of this involvement remains unspecified. On the one hand, because of their capabilities and status, major powers are largely independent of other actors' support and enjoy greater chances to achieve a favorable outcome in a dispute. Therefore, one can expect that major powers are more likely to initiate or intervene in a dispute unilaterally. On the other hand, the opposite hypothesis stating that great powers prefer to participate multilaterally in said disputes cannot be ruled out a priori. It is possible for major power status to influence participation in conflicts either directly or indirectly, as a result of a host of state-level and structural factors.

Using conflict as a framework for analyzing multilateralism represents an alternative approach to the more common focus on international organizations (IOs), international regimes, and international law. Membership in IOs and adherence to the rules established by regimes and treaties

often reflect genuine commitment to multilateralism and multilateral institutions. Yet, collective participation in conflict often requires a high level of policy coordination and the willingness to risk greater short-term costs and unpredictable long-term consequences (Patrick 2002; Wedgwood 2002). Collective participation in international disputes may represent a higher and more discriminating threshold for testing great powers' commitment to multilateralism.

### MULTILATERALISM AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

There is no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes multilateral action in the international relations literature. Scholars focus on either qualitative or quantitative aspects of multilateralism. Qualitative definitions center on the presence of specific principles underlying collective actions or agreements that are universally applied to all of the actors involved (Ruggie 1992). According to these definitions, non-discrimination, reciprocity, and self-restraint must be present for a collective endeavor to be considered multilateral. Alternatively, quantitative definitions of multilateralism concentrate on the number of actors involved in international actions. For instance, Kalher (1992) offers a distinction between multilateralism and minilateralism based on the numbers of participants. Nonetheless, while they disagree on a specific definition, most scholars appear to concur on what the essential traits of a multilateral action are. At its minimum, multilateralism can be defined as "the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states" (Keohane 1990: 731). Keohane's characterization of multilateralism contains both a qualitative and a quantitative dimension. It captures the most important aspect of multilateralism—i.e., the willingness of states to condition their actions to collective decisions about what policies should be pursued. It also sets a minimal threshold concerning the number of states among which collective decision-making should take place. Because of these characteristics, Keohane's (1990) definition is adopted here.

This is a narrow, "minimalist" conception of multilateralism. As indicated by Ruggie (1992), based on this definition alone, it can be difficult to discriminate between different degrees of collective policy coordination. It is assumed that the effort and commitment necessary for policy coordination among three actors is equivalent to those required to act multilaterally with a larger number of partners. A narrow definition of this kind also overlooks both the subtler distinctions between cooperation and coordination identified by Stein (1990) and other scholars (Caporaso 1992), and the goals to which policy coordination is aimed. However, a minimalist notion of multilateralism has the advantage of setting a clear distinction between unilateral action, bilateral cooperation, and multilateralism. Being able to categorize events—in this case participation in disputes—according to the above definition—allows us to identify a specific population of cases suitable to empirical analysis.

Collective participation in militarized conflict provides a novel perspective for the analysis of multilateralism. This

topic has often been looked at in the context of international institutions or international law (see, for instance, Caporaso 1992; Martin 1992; Ruggie 1992; Kahler 1992). Yet, Caporaso notes that multilateralism does not require a peaceful objective. States may engage in multilateral activities against other states. As Weber's (1992) analysis of the U.S. commitment to multilateralism within NATO indicates, alliances can be vehicles and expressions of multilateral behavior just as other international institutions. Collective efforts aimed at imposing sanctions on defecting states in the context of international regimes and agreements are generally considered as examples of multilateral action and commitment to multilateral principles. The concept of multilateralism has also been applied in the realm of international security and conflict management. For example, collective peacekeeping missions and instances of collective use of force are often offered as examples of multilateralism in practice (Wedgwood 2002). Indeed, the large international coalition that came together in 1991 to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait has been acclaimed as an outstanding instance of multilateral action (Stoll 1998; Patrick 2002).

Some might object that the typically ad hoc and transitory nature of military coalitions diminishes their multilateral character. While it may be true that multilateralism has most often been studied in the context of relatively enduring institutions such as treaties or IGOs, we continue to concur with Keohane (1990) that the essence of multilateralism lies in the coordination of national policies, not in its surrounding institutional context. Moreover, we see no reason to believe that coordination of military policy among three or more actors is apt to require significantly less negotiation, compromise, and adaptation than the institutionalized coordination of, say, trade or environmental policies. In fact, from this standpoint one might plausibly argue that cooperation in ad hoc military coalitions might at times represent an even greater commitment to multilateralism than coordination with known partners in the context of predictable institutions marked by standard operating procedures. We are disinclined to go too far with this argument since our aim is more modest—it is merely to show that military coalitions are a legitimate vehicle for the study of multilateralism.

While some attention has been given to the collective participation in interstate conflict (e.g., Mousseau 1997; Wemer and Lemke 1997), we know of no attempts explicitly to analyze multilateral behavior in the context of militarized interstate disputes. MIDs are united historical cases in which the threat, display, or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed toward the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state (Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996: 168). Because they involve the threat, display, or use of military force, interstate disputes constitute an interesting "intermediate" level of analysis between states' *multilateral participation*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of MIDs observed from 1816 through 1992, 84 percent, start and end as one-on-one affairs (Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996: 194).

## MAJOR POWER STATES AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

Careful observation of militarized disputes reveals that the presence of multiple participants appears to be related to a dispute's intensity, duration, and outcome. Interestingly, the involvement of major powers has similar effects. The presence of at least one great power increases the likelihood that a dispute will last longer and reach higher hostility levels. In addition, disputes involving the presence of major powers are more likely to come to a definitive termination, with one or more major powers being on the winning side. Disputes among minor powers are instead more likely to end in a stalemate (Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996).

What sets major powers apart from other states? There is a surprisingly widespread agreement with regard to what traits elevate a state to the rank of a major power and who the major powers have been in history. Scholars of conflict agree that major power status is determined by both tangible assets, such as the possession of above-average material capabilities, and by intangible elements, such as reputation. Analysts have relied on the definition provided in the Correlates of War (COW) project. The criteria originally used in the COW project for identifying a state as a major power "reflect the aggregated or collective judgement of the system membership. That is, a major power in any period is a state that is regarded by others—especially the other and typically more well-established majors—as one of that small 'oligarchy', to use Schwarzenberger's expression, that dominates not only in the region of each member, but globally as well. These states have taken on global interests and do a fair job of defending them" (Singer 1987: 121). "By definition, major powers are those actors with global (or at least multiregional) interests and capabilities" (Siverson and Starr 1991: 61-62). But just who are (or have been) the world's major powers? When asked this question by COW project researchers, diplomatic historians achieved a remarkable consensus around the states listed in Table 1 (Singer 1987).

In general, much is known about the propensity of great powers to become involved in conflicts, either wars or sub-war disputes. "Major power states are argued in the literature to gravitate to militarized conflicts, both because they have an interest in solving these matters to suit their own preferences, and because they have the capabilities to affect the outcomes of these conflicts" (Enterline 1999: 16). Given their wide range of economic, strategic, and political interests, and considering their capacity to project power beyond their own borders, it should not be surprising that great powers "account for a large proportion of the conflict behavior in the international system" (Gochman 1980: 89). For instance, by focusing specifically on war, Levy (1982) finds that great powers are historically more war-prone than other states and that, between 1495 and 1975, the "amount of war" in which they have engaged has been constant over time and unaffected by the amount of conflicts in previous periods. In addition, even when they do not directly initiate a conflict, major powers appear to have a lower utility threshold regarding the option of entering ongoing wars

≡ TABLE 1

MAJOR POWER STATUS, 1816-2002

|                 |                                 |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Austria-Hungary | 1816-1918                       |
| China           | 1950-2002                       |
| France          | 1816-1940, 1945-2002            |
| Germany/Prussia | 1816-1918, 1925-1945, 1991-2002 |
| Italy           | 1860-1943                       |
| Japan           | 1895-1945                       |
| Russia/USSR     | 1816-1917, 1922-2002            |
| United Kingdom  | 1816-2002                       |
| United States   | 1898-2002                       |

Source: Singer (1987) and Correlates of War 2 Project (2003).

(Altfeld and Bueno de Mesquita 1979). The multiplicity of their interests leads major powers to perceive some utility even in other states' conflicts and makes them more likely to intervene in those quarrels.

Regarding disputes, major powers have been involved in over half of the MIDs occurring between 1816 and 1976 (Gochman and Maoz 1990: 202). It has been found that a major power is more likely to become involved in a dispute against a minor power than against another major power. Major powers are more likely to initiate a dispute than minor powers (Gochman and Maoz 1990: 202-03), but they also tend to enter ongoing disputes as third parties at a faster rate than other states (Enterline 1999). When they do so, they are more likely to be on the winning side (Stoll 1998). Nonetheless, regardless of whether they are initiators or participants, the presence of major powers in militarized disputes increases the likelihood that other actors will intervene, and that such conflicts will become multiparty in nature (Gochman and Maoz 1990: 203).

However, there is evidence that major powers behave as rational actors with regard to conflict involvement. Before they start or join an ongoing conflict, major powers evaluate how capabilities are distributed, the potential for intervention of allies and third parties, and the likelihood that other major powers may become involved (Yamamoto and Bremer 1980; Siverson and King 1980; Bueno de Mesquita 1981; Huth 1998). In general, the literature on great powers and conflict involvement suggests that, because the most powerful states have global interests and are more likely to participate in conflicts of different kind, they attempt to maximize the returns and reduce the costs of such participation. Because—as indicated by Stoll (1998)—collective security initiatives have a greater likelihood of being successful, multilateralism may be a viable strategy for major power states to diffuse the costs of conflict involvement, while enjoying the dividends of victory.

Additional factors other than rational calculation and breadth of interests may help explain the greater proneness of major powers to become involved in conflicts in a multilateral fashion. Historically, major powers have shown greater propensity than small states to become members of alliances and have a large number of allies (Siverson and King 1980; Siverson and Sullivan 1984; Siverson and

Emmons 1991). Several studies have provided evidence that, for great powers, the relationship between number of alliances, number of allies, and conflict involvement is a positive one (Singer and Small 1966; Gochman 1980; Siverson and King 1980; Siverson and Sullivan 1984; Kegley and Raymond 1982; Siverson and Starr 1991; Huth 1998). Other forms of “associational ties,” such as trade relationships and membership in IOs, have been found to be related to the amount of conflicts in which great powers participate (Gochman 1980). Finally, because of the amount of capabilities they possess, major power states can also exercise a considerable “pull” on other states and manage to drag them into a conflict, either through coercion or through the dynamics of conflict diffusion (Siverson and Starr 1991).

Thus, existing studies on multilateralism and major powers’ conflict involvement tell us that major power status is positively related to participation in various forms of conflict. Yet, little is explicitly said or known about the nature of this involvement. A cursory examination of recent major powers’ actions may suggest that they are more prone to act unilaterally because they have the opportunity to do so. Yet, other determinants of great powers’ conflict involvement unveiled in the literature indirectly generate the expectation that great powers will favor a multilateral form of participation. The two rival hypotheses concerning the form of major power intervention in interstate disputes are further developed in the following section.

### PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

The expectation that great powers will act in coordination with other states in the international arena goes against the lesson that could be learned from observing recent behavior by the United States. The greater capabilities of major power states seem to decrease their dependence on other countries, while increasing their ability to project power and the likelihood that they will be able to steer the outcome of a dispute in their favor unilaterally. The propensity of major powers to “go it alone” is reinforced by the fact that minor powers will be able to contribute significantly to the outcome of a dispute only in rare circumstance. The costs of coordinating policies with lesser powers may outweigh the benefits that can be received through unilateral action. For instance, both during the civil war in Bosnia in the early 1990s and during the Kosovo crisis of 1999, the United States was torn between its desire to act collectively through NATO and the need to compromise on its preferred course of action. While multilateral action was deemed to have greater potential to stop Serbia, the United States was forced to engage in extensive diplomatic bargaining in order to convince its NATO allies to carry out air strikes. Similarly, in the attempt to garner more partners in the very recent invasion of Iraq, the United States was forced to delay the beginning of military operations well past the timetable originally set by the Bush administration.

By this logic it is the smaller, less powerful states that privilege multilateral foreign policy behavior in order to

diffuse the costs of such policy choices (Dixon 1984; Patrick 2002). Moreover, smaller states may often have foreign policy interests that conflict with those of great power states. When this occurs, great powers will not seek the help of minor powers who, in turn, are likely to withdraw their support or oppose collective involvement in a dispute. An additional motive for great powers to eschew multilateral action is that they fear the erosion of power and status set in motion by bandwagoning effects and by the division of the “spoils of victory” (Schweller 1994). Powerful states may find the help of their partners inconsequential or outright detrimental when a dispute ensues. Major powers may then prefer to act alone not only because they can, but also in order to avoid small states’ attempts to free-ride or the risk of their defection.

However, the reverse conditions may also occur. Great powers may seek the support of smaller states in order to diffuse the costs of more frequent conflict involvements. The advantages derived from sharing the costs incurred in a dispute may surpass the costs of policy coordination. In addition, major powers tend to have more allies and multiple, overlapping international organization (IO) memberships. Such factors may increase the likelihood of multilateral participation in disputes. Alliances and other institutional agreements may contain formal provisions specifying the conditions under which partners have to provide support (Leeds et al. 2000). Membership in IOs and alliances may also instill the habit of coordinating policies with other states. Great powers may also be willing to act multilaterally because collective actions are more likely to be perceived as legitimate by the international community. Finally, it is reasonable to expect that great powers are more likely to act multilaterally exactly because minor powers are prone to jump on the bandwagon or volunteer their contribution in exchange for future benefits (Schweller 1994).

A partial answer to these conflicting hypotheses is obtained through an examination of the simple bivariate relationship between major power status and multilateral participation in militarized disputes. The unit of analysis here is state participation in militarized disputes. Participants are classified as major powers according to the listing in Table 1 above. A participation is defined as multilateral if there are at least two additional states participating on the same side of the dispute.<sup>2</sup> Under this definition the 2003 invasion of Iraq would qualify as multilateral due to the participation of U.S., U.K., and Australian forces. Similarly, the original enforcement of Iraqi “no-fly” zones by the U.S., U.K., and France was a multilateral action, though it later lost this status with the withdrawal of France. One potential weakness of this definition is that it may too easily treat independent and uncoordinated actions as multilateral. To guard against this possibility we will also examine a much

<sup>2</sup> Note that if three states participate on the same side in a single dispute it counts as three multilateral observations. We do realize that this operational rule raises questions regarding the independence of observations, an issue we come back to later.

≡ TABLE 2  
MULTILATERAL DISPUTE PARTICIPATION AND MAJOR POWER STATUS

|           |                  | Major power     | Non-major power | Odds ratio      |
|-----------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1816-2002 | Multilateral     | 362<br>(23.1%)  | 492<br>(12.2%)  |                 |
|           | Non-multilateral | 1206<br>(76.9%) | 3540<br>(87.8%) | 2.16*<br>(.44)  |
| 1816-1900 | Multilateral     | 97<br>(34.3%)   | 51<br>(11.4%)   |                 |
|           | Non-multilateral | 186<br>(65.7%)  | 398<br>(88.6%)  | 4.07*<br>(1.00) |
| 1901-2002 | Multilateral     | 265<br>(20.6%)  | 441<br>(12.3%)  |                 |
|           | Non-multilateral | 1020<br>(79.4%) | 3142<br>(87.7%) | 1.85*<br>(.42)  |

\*  $p < .01$

Cell entries represent individual state's participation in militarized disputes during the specified time interval. Robust standard errors of the odds ratios are

more restrictive definition of multilateral participation requiring that each state begin its dispute involvement on the same day.

Table 2 displays joint distributions and odds ratios for 1816-2002 and for two periods split at 1900.<sup>3</sup> The results are remarkably consistent in showing that major powers are substantially more likely than small and middle powers to participate in disputes multilaterally. This effect is especially pronounced during the 19th century when major powers were nearly four times more likely to engage in multilateral dispute participation. Although the effect diminishes in the period after 1900 it still reveals major powers to be almost twice as likely to join with others in militarized disputes. Our more restrictive indicator of multilateral action produces substantially identical results even though it admits fewer than half the 854 multilateral participations of the original definition.<sup>4</sup>

These preliminary results are striking, but the bivariate analysis does not allow us to conclude that the relationship between great power status and multilateral participation in MID's is not spurious. Major power status per se may not affect the propensity for a dispute to become multilateral. Rather, multilateralism may be the result of the host of control variables that have been found in the literature to be related to great powers' behavior in conflict situations and

that have been addressed in the preceding section. The apparent propensity of powerful states to participate in conflicts multilaterally may also depend on the contextual characteristics of the disputes in which great powers tend to become involved. We explore these possibilities through multivariate analysis in the following section.

#### MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Even though preliminary analysis shows a strong effect of major power status on the probability of multilateral dispute participation, we still have reason to remain skeptical. Numerous confounding factors may intervene to mediate the positive, direct effect of major power status on the dependent variable. We shall consider two general classes of potentially confounding variables based on relatively enduring state level attributes and more transitory characteristics of the immediate situation.

The factors that may affect the likelihood of multilateral participation in an interstate dispute and confound the direct effect of great power status on the dependent variable are summarized in Table 3. We have classified such factors as "state-level" or "situational," depending on whether they relate to attributes of individual state actors or to the peculiarities of any given dispute. Each of the eight factors identified in Table 3 represent a hypothesis of spuriousness between major power status and multilateral dispute participation. If one or more of the hypotheses are correct, then the observed relationship between major power status and multilateral participation should diminish to zero once we control for the suspect state level attributes and situational factors.

<sup>3</sup> The table is constructed from version 3.02 of the MID set (Ghosn and Palmer, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Only 405 dispute participations qualify under the more restrictive definition. This indicator produces odds ratios of 1.9 (.42) for the full period, and 7.8 (2.7) and 1.3 (.36) before and after 1900, respectively.

≡ TABLE 3

FACTORS POTENTIALLY CONFOUNDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAJOR POWER STATUS AND MULTILATERAL PARTICIPATION  
IN MILITARIZED INTERSTATE DISPUTES

| <b>State attributes</b>          |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Organizational experience</i> | based on memberships in IGOs or alliances facilitates policy coordination with other states and major powers probably have more organizational experience than others. |
| <i>Material capabilities</i>     | help define major power status. Capabilities also extend the projection of power and may provide a means to attract or coerce others to join in disputes.              |
| <i>Revisionist states</i>        | are in the minority by definition. By challenging the status quo they are less likely to attract the active support of other powers.                                   |
| <i>Democracy</i>                 | fosters the multilateral participation as a way to legitimize the use of military force for both domestic and international audiences.                                 |
| <b>Situational factors</b>       |  |
| <i>Interstate war</i>            | is the most serious form of interstate dispute and tends to attract multiple actors. Major powers are more likely than others to participate in wars.                  |
| <i>Dispute duration</i>          | may be extended by the participation of major powers and longer disputes may attract additional participants either through coercion or coordination.                  |
| <i>Multiple opponents</i>        | may be another sign of intense or enlarged disputes which attract the interest of major powers. Multiple opponents may encourage participation by allies.              |
| <i>Major power opponents</i>     | like multiple opponents, may indicate enlarged disputes that prompt the wider interest of other major powers.  |

State-level factors include organizational experience, material capabilities, revisionism and democracy. Major powers' multilateral conflict behavior may be the result of their tendency to have more allies and organizational ties. We measure a state's organizational experience with an admittedly crude proxy variable comprised of its total number of military alliance commitments.<sup>5</sup> We assume that it may be easier for a state with multiple organizational ties to summon the support of its allies and partners when a dispute arises. In addition, multiple organizational ties generate patterns of stable cooperation that: (1) "acclimate" and prepare states to the requirements implicit in the efforts of foreign policy coordination; and (2) reduce the costs of such coordination efforts.

High levels of material capabilities also provide major power states with the wherewithal to project power and engage in disputes both regionally and globally. Thus, major powers' multilateralism may be nothing more than a reflection of their extensive material capabilities. Material capabilities are measured using the well known COW composite index (Singer 1987). Capabilities and major power status may appear to be redundant, and the two variables do coincide to a considerable extent. Yet, as discussed in the preceding sections, the overlap is neither perfect nor complete. Historical evidence suggests that there is often a temporal lag between a state's accumulation of vast material capabilities and its capacity to establish itself as a key regional or

global player. In contrast, some states have been considered by other actors as great powers well after their declining material capabilities could no longer match their status.<sup>6</sup>

Revisionism is the third state-level characteristic we consider as a possible intervening variable.<sup>7</sup> Revisionist states, those who brazenly challenge the status quo, are apt to be in the minority almost by definition. It is reasonable to expect that isolated, revisionist states will be more likely to act unilaterally—either as a result of having few allies or because of their reluctance to coordinate policies with the vast majority of status quo countries—and that the opposite will be true of status quo powers. This reasoning suggests that in any confrontation between major powers, the status quo side is more likely to act multilaterally than the revisionist challenger. The indicator is derived from the Militarized Interstate Disputes data set, which classifies as revisionist states that openly attempt "to challenge pre-dispute conditions by (1) making claims to territory, (2) attempting to overthrow a regime, or (3) declaring the intention not to

<sup>5</sup> The data are from Gibler and Sarkees (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> It is also plausible to argue that smaller powers will prefer to enter into disputes multilaterally to overcome the limitations imposed by their scarce capabilities and to share the costs of dispute involvement with wealthier countries (Dixon 1984). We thus considered the alternative hypothesis that both stronger and weaker states share the same propensity toward multilateral participation in disputes. Although we tested for such a U-shaped relationship, it was not borne out by any of our empirical analyses.

<sup>7</sup> Revisionism is somewhat different than other state-level characteristic because it reflects the state's position on a particular issue rather than a more enduring attribute of the state itself.

abide by another state's policy" (Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996: 178). States are coded as 1 if revisionist, otherwise 0.

Democracy, our final state-level attribute, may foster multilateral dispute participation as a way to legitimize the use of military force both for domestic and international audiences (Mousseau 1997). Such an effect was apparently evident during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq when the U.S. and U.K. tried but failed to obtain explicit authorization from the Security Council. And once the war began both governments took great pains to publicly portray their military action as the effort of a broad coalition comparable to that of the 1991 Gulf War. Moreover, because some of the most internationally active major powers have also been the most democratic (e.g., U.K., U.S., France), it may be that it is democracies, not major powers, that are prone to multilateral dispute participation. Our measure of democracy employs indicators from the well-known Polity IV project; following Jagers and Gurr (1995) we use the difference between the Polity democracy and autocracy indices (i.e., democracy minus autocracy) which ranges from +10 to -10.

The level of intensity of a dispute, its duration, and the opposing participants comprise what we term situational factors. First, we would expect disputes that reach the level of interstate war will have a greater probability of involving multiple participants on each side. Moreover, we know that major powers are generally much more likely to engage in war than other states. Therefore, the multilateral dispute involvement observed of major powers may merely reflect the intensity of disputes. Similarly, the duration of a dispute may influence the observed great powers-multilateral participation relationship. Jones, Bremer, and Singer (1996: 188) find that "the larger the role of major powers in a dispute, the longer the dispute is expected to be." Longer disputes involving major powers are likely to elicit the participation of a greater number of actors, as an indirect result of the dynamics of diffusion endogenous to all conflicts and/or "the pull" exercised by great powers. Finally, the number of opponents on one side in the dispute may confound the impact of major power status on the likelihood that a dispute will be multilateral. It is possible that, either as initiators or participants in a dispute, great powers will attract a greater number of opponents than would normally be the case. The presence of a large number of opponents or of major power opponents may lead to the expansion and diffusion of the conflict, which would then attract an even larger number of participants on both sides. The resulting participation will thus be classified as multilateral, but major power status may not have had any *direct* effect on the multilateral character of the dispute.

Indicators for all of the variables that have been labeled as "situational" are taken from version 3.02 of the Militarized Interstate Disputes data set. Interstate war is registered as a dichotomous variable based on the highest act undertaken by the participating state. The duration of disputes are measured in logged days to accommodate the expected nonlinearity. And finally, we use a pair of dichotomous indicators registering whether each participant faces more than

one opponent or not, and whether a major power is among the opponents or not. All situational controls are expected to have a positive effect on the probability of multilateral dispute participation.

Estimation results are displayed in Table 4. The main entries in each column are unstandardized logistic regression estimates with robust standard errors in parenthesis. The first column lists results for the entire period with the remaining columns containing time periods paralleling those in Table 2.<sup>8</sup> The results are easily summarized. The full period (1816-2002) and both sub-periods deliver quite comparable results showing that major power status continues to have a substantial positive impact on the likelihood of multilateral dispute participation. Contrary to the logic outlined above, in no case does the presence of controls significantly diminish the estimated effect of major power status. In fact, the major power estimates in the top row of Table 4 are consistently larger than the same estimates absent the control variables.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, these results remain essentially intact when we replicate the estimations with our more restrictive definition of multilateralism.<sup>10</sup>

The control variables generally work as anticipated though with varying success across the different time periods. Among the state level attributes, the observed effect of revisionism was most consistent with our prior expectations—revisionist states do appear to be less likely than others to participate in militarized disputes multilaterally. Perhaps most surprising was finding that the major power propensity toward multilateral participation appears to be largely independent of material capabilities despite the strong correlation ( $r = .76$ ) between capabilities and major power status. Although we should not make too much of this single finding, it is at least consistent with the idea that major power status is not conveyed by national capabilities alone. The absence of any discernable effect of democracy on multilateralism is also surprising. The finding reinforces the notion that the effects of regime type and democracy on conflict behavior are more likely to be detected in a dyadic context, rather than in the examination of monadic decisions to take part in disputes. It also suggests, at least indirectly, that autocratic major powers are equally as likely to draw the support of lesser powers. Finally, the finding may be a function of the fact that all MID involvements, not only dispute initiations, are included in the analysis. The need to

<sup>8</sup> The number of observations declines in Table 4 for two reasons. First, all 84 MID participations occurring in 2001 are lost due to the absence of alliance data. And second, there are an additional 479 participations with missing data on the democracy index. Dropping democracy and number of allies from the analysis to preserve all 5600 participations through 2001 yields results virtually identical to those reported in Table 4.

<sup>9</sup> Exponentiating logistic estimates transforms them into odds ratios. Stated as odds ratios, the major power effect in Table 4 is 3.8 for the full time period, and 5.3 and 3.6 for the periods before and after 1900.

<sup>10</sup> The comparable major power logit estimates are 1.042 (.378) for the full period, and 2.243 (.535) and .784 (.358) for the periods before and after 1900.



≡ TABLE 4  
LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF MULTILATERAL DISPUTE PARTICIPATION ON MAJOR POWER STATUS WITH SELECTED CONTROLS

|                        | 1816-2000          | 1816-1900          | 1901-2000           |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Major power            | 1.330**<br>(.314)  | 1.660**<br>(.412)  | 1.286**<br>(.306)   |
| Material capabilities  | -3.974<br>(2.372)  | -1.792<br>(1.773)  | -6.618**<br>(2.157) |
| Number of allies       | .012<br>(.008)     | .133*<br>(.068)    | .016*<br>(.008)     |
| Revisionist state      | -.877**<br>(.136)  | -.352<br>(.197)    | -1.022**<br>(.165)  |
| Democracy              | -.018<br>(.014)    | -.005<br>(.016)    | -.025<br>(.016)     |
| Interstate war         | 1.272**<br>(.143)  | 1.263**<br>(.287)  | 1.335**<br>(.185)   |
| ln(Duration)           | .369**<br>(.029)   | .255**<br>(.063)   | .388**<br>(.033)    |
| Multiple opponents     | .724**<br>(.152)   | -.150<br>(.320)    | .844**<br>(.184)    |
| Major power opponents  | -.602**<br>(.153)  | -.465**<br>(.173)  | -.617**<br>(.188)   |
| Constant               | -3.396**<br>(.170) | -3.405**<br>(.303) | -3.458**<br>(.190)  |
| Wald $\chi^2$ (df = 9) | 649.4**            | 119.6**            | 572.5**             |
| Number of observations | 5037               | 686                | 4351                |

\* p .05, \*\* p .01

legitimize conflict participation in the eyes of domestic and international audiences may be necessary only when democratic regimes contemplate aggression.

With the exception of the presence of a major power opponent, the situational factors generally performed according to expectations. The results confirm that multilateral participation is encouraged in disputes that escalate to war, that are of long duration, and that have multiple opponents. Even so, the presence of a *major power* opponent actually appears to diminish the likelihood of multilateralism, not increase it. Further investigation of this puzzling finding reveals that there is virtually no bivariate relationship between multilateralism and the presence of a major power opponent ( $r = .015$ ); the negative relationship obtains only in the context of the specification in Table 4.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Our purpose in this study was narrowly focused on exposing any relationship that might exist between major power status and multilateral dispute participation. A summary evaluation of recent behavior on the part of the United States supports the expectation of a major power's propensity to eschew multilateral military action largely because

they have the opportunity and the means to do so. By this reasoning unilateralism is the preferred form of action whenever possible because it best preserves both sovereignty and the freedom to influence outcomes. And yet, given the fact that major powers are disproportionately involved in militarized conflicts as well as alliances and other international institutions, it also seemed plausible that such powers might actually be more prone to multilateral participation even if only as a function of their overall level of global military interests and activities.

To choose between these contending expectations we turned to an empirical examination of participation in militarized interstate disputes since 1816. Dispute participation qualified as multilateral if there were at least two other parties on the same side, though we also considered a more restrictive operational definition requiring all parties to have entered the dispute on the same day. Since the choice of definition proved immaterial to our conclusions we reported results from just the less restrictive conception of multilateral participation. These results were unambiguous: major powers are clearly more prone to participate multilaterally than are other states. Moreover, this empirical relationship appears exceedingly stable across the 19th and 20th centuries and in the face of several potentially confounding

factors associated with state level attributes or the immediate conflict situation.

Before closing we should acknowledge one important qualification to our results. While we can conclude that major powers are indeed more prone toward multilateral participation than other states, our results alone cannot tell us if this is due to their policy preferences, or to available opportunities, or to some combination of the two.<sup>11</sup> It is of course possible that major powers do hold uncommonly strong preferences for multilateral action. It is also possible that most states prefer to act with others when they can, but that major powers find it easier than others to recruit willing partners. Unfortunately, our present research design is incapable of disentangling opportunity from willingness (Siverson and Starr 1990).

We began our remarks with reference to America's current debate between multilateralism and unilateralism. While our study does not aid in resolving this debate—which, after all, is as much about individual values as geopolitical realities—it does bring to light heretofore overlooked patterns in the historical use of multilateral action. The major powers' observed propensity to engage the world multilaterally, particularly in the high stakes arena of militarized conflict, is a finding that takes on added significance against the backdrop of the current debate. But there are additional empirical questions that remain unanswered. Do major powers engage as readily in other forms of multilateral action? Does institutional context make a difference? Are major powers equally distinctive when engaging in other forms of international behavior? Of course all these questions assume that even with today's unprecedented concentration of military, economic, and cultural resources in a single state, in a single hyperpower, that "major power" is still a meaningful designation in world politics.

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