

Correspondence

Reconsidering the Outcomes of Foreign-Imposed Regime Change

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To the Editors (Ruolin Su writes):

In “You Can’t Always Get What You Want: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Seldom Improves Interstate Relations,” Alexander Downes and Lindsey O’Rourke offer important contributions to the study of how foreign-imposed regime change (FIRC) affects interstate relations. According to Downes and O’Rourke, states should exercise caution when considering whether to pursue covert or overt FIRC, because neither type of regime change improves relations between interveners and targets by reducing the likelihood of their engaging in future conflict and, in many cases, it makes conflict more likely.¹ They imply that the emergence of post-FIRC conflicts marks the failure of FIRC in interstate relations.

Two theoretical problems arise from Downes and O’Rourke’s oversimplification of the purpose of FIRCs. To begin, interveners may have objectives for engaging in FIRCs other than improving interstate relations, such as weakening rivals and thereby advancing their own security—goals that are at least as important as avoiding future conflict. Consider, for example, U.S. covert FIRCs in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. As John Prados writes, “Afghanistan by itself was of little importance to the United States.”² The main objective of these FIRCs was to frustrate the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and to prevent the spread of Soviet influence in the region.³ Indeed, the FIRCs forced the Soviets into a long-lasting and costly stalemate, which contributed to

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1. Alexander B. Downes and Lindsey A. O’Rourke, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Seldom Improves Interstate Relations,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Fall 2016), pp. 43–89, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00256. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.
 2. Steve Galster, “Afghanistan: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1973–1990,” October 9, 2001, in John Prados and Svetlana Savranskaya, eds., *The September 11th Sourcebooks*, Vol. 2: *Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book (NSA EBB) No. 57, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/essay.html>.
 3. John Prados, ed., “U.S. Analysis of the Soviet War in Afghanistan: Declassified,” October 9, 2001, NSA EBB No. 57, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us.html>.

International Security, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Winter 2017/18), pp. 172–177, doi:10.1162/ISEC_c_00309
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the ultimate demise of the Soviet empire.⁴ According to Downes and O'Rourke, however, these FIRCs would not be considered an effective policy tool, given the emergence of a militarized interstate dispute (MID) between the United States and Afghanistan in 1998.

The second theoretical problem is that Downes and O'Rourke do not acknowledge that a state's decision to engage in a FIRC may result from a lack of viable policy alternatives, and not from the perceived utility of preventing interstate conflict. Therefore, even though a FIRC may not reduce the likelihood of conflict, the intervener could still regard one as necessary. As Downes and O'Rourke note, Rwanda engaged in a FIRC against Zaire in 1997 because it considered the massive Hutu refugee camps in eastern Zaire (supported by Zaire's president, Mobutu Sese Seko) "an intolerable threat to its security" (p. 76). Were other policy options available to confront this threat? The absence of available evidence suggests not.

Downes and O'Rourke's article also suffers from two empirical problems. First, to test the positive association between FIRC and post-FIRC MIDs, Downes and O'Rourke "compare the likelihood of military conflict for interstate dyads that experienced a FIRC to those that did not" (pp. 50–51). This comparison is inappropriate, however, because their dyads may not have a similar propensity for conflict. Consequently, dyads with the highest likelihood of interstate conflict that have experienced a FIRC could be compared to those with the lowest likelihood of conflict and no FIRCs. In the extreme, the result could be comparisons of, for example, the likelihood of a MID between the United States and Mexico to one between the United States and Australia. Doing so risks exaggerating the positive effect of FIRCs on the initiation of MIDs.

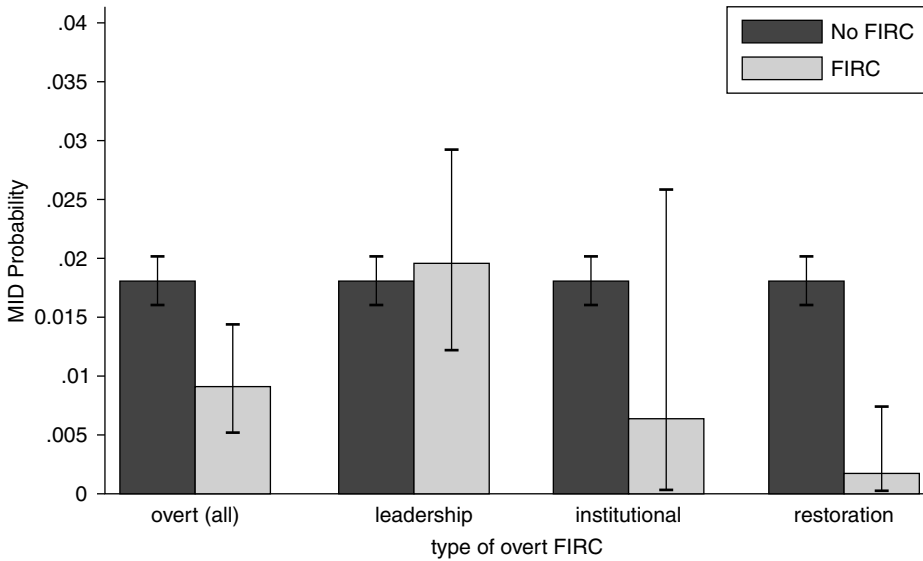
Another factor that renders Downes and O'Rourke's results less than convincing is their coding of the China case. In their dataset, Downes and O'Rourke code China as having experienced a leadership FIRC in 1928, when Japan assassinated Chang Tso-lin. Six MIDs are coded after this supposed FIRC (in 1931, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, and 1937). Together, they account for more than 23 percent of all MIDs following an overt leadership FIRC. This case, is worth further investigation, however, because when he was killed, Chang was not a state leader, but a Manchurian warlord. The six following MIDs were fought mainly between Japan and China, not between Japan and Manchuria. Also, Chang's killing was the result not of a decision made by the Japanese central government, but of a plot by the radical wing of the Kwantung Army.⁵ Thus, the assassination of Chang is not an appropriate case of leadership FIRC.

To address the statistical problems above, I reran the models, including only states that experienced a MID and excluding the China case. The major discrepancy in the

4. Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1999), pp. 693–708.

5. Paul S. Dull, "The Assassination of Chang Tso-lin," *Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (August 1952), pp. 453–463.

Figure 1. Overt Foreign-Imposed Regime Change (FIRC) and the Probability of Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs)



findings is the effect of overt FIRC on MIDs initiation. Contra Downes and O'Rourke, the first pair of bars in figure 1 indicates that a state conducting an overt FIRC against another state discernably decreases the likelihood that the two states will experience a MID within the next ten years. The second pair of bars shows that the positive effect of overt leadership FIRC on the initiation of MIDs is no longer statistically significant. An overt institutional FIRC reduces the probability of a MID nearly 67 percent, or 7 percent higher than Downes and O'Rourke's result. These results thus provide relatively strong support for the effect of overt FIRC on reducing interstate conflict.

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Alexander B. Downes and Lindsey A. O'Rourke Reply:

We appreciate Ruolin Su's thoughtful engagement with our article, but her criticisms of our theory and evidence are misguided.¹

In our article, we analyzed one consequence of foreign-imposed regime change (FIRC): whether FIRC improves relations between the states involved. Su claims that states may pursue FIRC for reasons other than preventing future conflicts, and that interveners sometimes choose FIRC owing to a lack of viable alternatives. We do not disagree, but we find these objections puzzling because determining the causes of FIRC was not the focus of the article, and these insights are entirely consistent with our theory. Su mistakes our measure of the effect of FIRC—intervener-target conflict—for the cause of regime change. We did not argue, as Su asserts, that interveners pursue FIRC solely because of its “perceived utility of preventing interstate conflict.” Rather, we note that if regime change works as policymakers expect, “regardless of the specific source of disagreement during an interstate dispute, FIRC should have a positive influence on intervener-target relations by changing the two states’ relationship from one marred by conflicting interests to one characterized by mutual interests” (p. 51). Su is thus attacking a theoretical straw man.

Regarding our evidence, Su claims that because dyads in which FIRC occurs may be more likely to engage in militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) than dyads without FIRC, our statistical analysis is biased. Strangely, Su ignores that we specifically addressed this objection in the article. First, we conducted robustness tests “using genetic matching to check whether interveners select targets for different types of FIRC with which they are already likely or unlikely to fight” (pp. 73–74). Matching is a method of data preprocessing that compares treated cases (i.e., states that experienced a FIRC) with control cases (states that did not) that are as similar as possible along a set of covariates so that any difference between the two groups can be attributed to the treatment. One of the variables we matched on was the number of years since states in a dyad engaged in a MID with each other. Second, we ran fixed effects models, which are not biased by differences in MID propensity across dyads given that they explain variation over time only within dyads. As we reported in the article, our findings using both methods were largely unchanged (p. 73 n. 95 and p. 74 n. 96).²

This oversight aside, Su's alternative model, which limits the analysis to states that have experienced MIDs, does not solve the problem she raises—dyads with a low propensity for MIDs (e.g., United States-Australia) may still be included because their members have engaged in conflicts against other states. A more sensible suggestion

1. Alexander B. Downes and Lindsey A. O'Rourke, “You Can't Always Get What You Want: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Seldom Improves Interstate Relations,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Fall 2016), pp. 43–89, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00256.

2. See also appendices M and K of the supplementary materials for our article, available at doi:10.7910/DVN/7Y4TD8.

would be to include only those dyads that at some point experience conflict. Yet this approach is also not an appropriate test of our theory because we argue that a dyad's propensity for conflict is partly a function of having experienced a FIRC. Following this procedure would drop dozens of FIRCs involving dyads that had not previously experienced a MID, biasing the analysis against our argument and decreasing the statistical significance of our findings.³

Even if we accepted Su's methodology, her conclusion that overt FIRCs as a whole decrease the likelihood of a MID does not strongly contradict our reported results (p. 69) because we argue that different types of FIRCs have different effects (pp. 57–63)—leadership FIRCs increase the likelihood of MIDs, restoration FIRCs decrease their likelihood, and institutional FIRCs have no effect—which is precisely the pattern she reports.

Finally, Su contends that an influential case of overt leadership FIRC—Japan's assassination of Chang Tso-lin in 1928—is not a FIRC because Chang was a Manchurian warlord rather than the leader of China, and the killing was not directed by the Japanese government. This is a complicated case, which we cannot do justice to in the space allotted, but the evidence broadly supports our interpretation.⁴ First, Su provides no evidence to support her assertion that Chang Tso-lin was not the leader of China.⁵ Although China was territorially fragmented during the Warlord Era (1916–28), and Chang was on the verge of being pushed out of power by Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists, numerous sources affirm that Chang was the leader of China's internationally recognized government from June 1927 until his assassination on June 4, 1928.⁶ Second, although the assassination was carried out by members of the Kwantung Army without the knowledge of Japanese Premier Tanaka Giichi, Tanaka could not disavow the officers' actions, making the case appropriate for our study. Because the military could topple any civilian government by withdrawing its ministers from the cabinet,⁷ Tanaka was ultimately forced to resign after the army refused to admit that its officers were responsible.⁸ These pathological civil-military relations allowed the Japanese mili-

3. Space limitations prevent us from discussing all relevant issues here. Please see the online appendix we have created for this purpose, available at <https://alexanderdownes.weebly.com/research.html>; and <https://sites.google.com/site/lindseyourourke/Publications>.

4. We provide further discussion in the online appendix.

5. The source she cites about the role of Japan in the assassination also does not support this claim. Paul S. Dull, "The Assassination of Chang Tso-lin," *Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (August 1952), pp. 453–463.

6. See, for example, Martha Ross and Bertold Spuler, *Rulers and Governments of the World, Vol. 2: 1492 to 1929* (London: Bowker, 1977), p. 129; Harris M. Lentz III, *Encyclopedia of Heads of State and Governments 1900 through 1945* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1999), pp. 84–85; and James E. Sheridan, "The Warlord Era: Politics and Militarism under the Peking Government, 1916–28," in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 317.

7. Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931–1945: A Critical Perspective on Japan's Role in World War II* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), pp. 35–36.

8. Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), pp. 164–166.

tary to dictate state policy—a trend that would continue in the Mukden (1931) and Marco Polo Bridge (1937) Incidents.

In sum, Su criticizes our theory for claims it did not make; faults our empirics for failing to account for a potential problem that we carefully addressed; proposes a flawed alternative model; and seeks to disqualify a case of FIRC with little evidence. Thus, although we appreciate Su's effort to engage our work, we are unpersuaded by these critiques and stand by our analysis.

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