



# Influence of International Organizations on Great-Power War Involvement: A Preliminary Analysis

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Recent research shows that participation in international governmental organizations (IGOs) dampens interstate conflict. The relevant evidence for this causal attribution comes from *shared* memberships in IGOs and the incidence of disputes between *pairs* of states. This paper presents a preliminary attempt to determine whether participation in IGOs *in general* has had a pacifying effect on the major powers' involvement in wars since 1945. That is, it studies the behavior of states as monads (rather than dyads), and it turns attention to wars (rather than disputes) that were the original focus of the democratic-peace theory. Moreover, this paper makes an initial effort to address two confounding factors that may be responsible for the pacifying effects of IGOs on state behavior. First, peaceful states are more likely to join IGOs. Thus, the alleged pacifying effects of IGOs may be due to this self-selection and, if so, IGOs may not have any *independent* impact on interstate peace. IGO membership will then be only a symptom of the original peaceful disposition of certain states and not a cause of this disposition. Second, states with common interests are more likely to form IGOs among themselves. Thus, the absence of war among these states may be more a reflection of these original common interests rather than any subsequent socialization attributable to their participation in IGOs. One needs therefore to account for a state's general subscription to international norms, and to separate the effects of this orientation from its willingness to accommodate partisan differences as a result of becoming socialized in an IGO's culture of collective decision-making. The veto record of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and their respective ratification of the major international conventions on human rights are considered in an initial assessment of these empirical possibilities. These data, however, fail to show any systematic pattern. While this null finding is disappointing, it suggests the need for further research to confirm the effects of IGOs on interstate peace and the causal paths responsible for these effects.

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## Introductory Remarks

International governmental organizations (IGOs) contribute to world peace.<sup>1</sup> An early example of this causal attribution was advanced by Immanuel Kant (1957 [1795]) in his now well-known treatise, *Perpetual Peace*. Kant averred that a federation of like-minded states — what he termed a ‘pacific union’ — could serve the cause of peace. The norms and procedures resulting from this community provide a basis for the international rule of law, and they help to curb bellicose impulses. This pacific union, along with a ‘republican’ form of government and a ‘cosmopolitan’ disposition, constitute the three components of a triad supporting what has popularly become known as the ‘liberal peace.’

One famous recent formulation of this ‘liberal peace’ is presented in the influential book by Bruce Russett and John Oneal (2001), where they argue and offer evidence that there is a virtuous cycle whereby democracy, foreign trade, and IGOs reinforce each other and help to dampen the incidence of militarized disputes among states collectively. Among other findings, these colleagues’ research suggests that the larger the number of shared memberships in these institutions, the less likely that any given pair of relevant states is to become embroiled in such conflict (see also Russett *et al.*, 1998). That is, the number of IGOs in which both parties to a dyad are members has been negatively related to this type of international conflict in the past. This relationship appears to be rather robust, as it persists even after researchers have controlled for the possible effects of other pertinent factors (such as geographic contiguity, power ratio) on conflict propensity. Moreover, not only has shared IGO membership had a direct effect in reducing the risk of dyadic conflict, it has also tended to reduce this danger indirectly by enhancing democracy and foreign trade, which have in turn facilitated the avoidance of militarized disputes.

## Further Queries

This paper seeks to pursue further this important line of inquiry. Three issues come to mind in extending the research on this topic. First, the use of shared IGO membership as an independent variable directs one’s attention to a plausible causal pattern at the level of dyadic relations. Does the influence of participation in IGOs also apply monadically? That is, whereas two states that have joined many same IGOs are less likely to be involved in militarized disputes than other pairs that have few IGOs in common, what can one say about a state’s general proclivity for conflict involvement on the basis of its own participation in IGOs alone? What is this general proclivity regardless of the record of IGO participation on the part of the other state



that happens to be paired with it as a unit of analysis in studying their bilateral foreign relations?

Second, shared IGO membership can be an indicator of common interests *and/or* common institutional ties. Presumably, states join the same IGOs (or create such IGOs) because they have a common stake in matters falling within these organizations' jurisdiction. It seems quite reasonable, even obvious, to argue that states with such common interests should be less susceptible to becoming involved in militarized disputes with each other. This argument would be similar to saying that states that are partners in a military alliance (or diplomatic pact, or custom union) can be expected to have a lower incidence of conflict between them than others that do not have such common interests. To say, however, that IGOs have a pacifying influence on interstate relations should or can mean more than the seeming tautology just mentioned. One could (should?) be suggesting that IGOs contribute to a more peaceful world for reasons other than the initial common interests that persuaded states to join the same IGOs. Shared IGOs could have a separate and independent pacifying effect to the extent that they provide an institutional forum for joint deliberation. These IGOs could facilitate multilateral negotiation on issues of common concern and, in the long run, even foster norms of partisan mutual adjustment. Accordingly, it would be useful to determine this value-added contribution of IGOs to international peace, a contribution that is subsequent to and different from the original motivations (i.e., common interests) that inclined states to join the same IGOs.

Third, it seems sensible to separate the specific interests that cause states to join IGOs from a generic disposition to observe international principles. Membership in an IGO implies a certain willingness to abide by the prevailing 'rules of the game,' and to submit to the procedures and outcomes of collective decision-making. Conversely, a decision to decline to join an IGO or to withdraw from (or boycott) an IGO after joining it implies a preference for unilateralism and/or a rejection of international principles. Such a decision would be particularly noteworthy when it pertains to the premier IGOs with universal membership, such as the League of Nations and the United Nations. This decision may reflect a defiance of international censure (e.g., Italy and Japan after their respective invasion of Ethiopia and China in the 1930s), or a predilection for isolationism (e.g., the US after World War I). Except for a few cases with other understandable reasons (e.g., Taiwan's and, until recently, Switzerland's absence from the United Nations), membership in IGOs can therefore offer clues about a state's general inclination to emphasize its own policy discretion *vs* its general acceptance of the principles of multilateral diplomacy. This observation in turn directs attention to selection effects. That is, states with certain policy values are more likely to join (or remain in) IGOs, whereas others with different policy values are less likely to join (or remain in)



IGOs. Instead of being a causal factor influencing these values, IGO membership can be just symptomatic of these values. If so, a state's predilection for conflict shapes its attitudes toward IGOs and its decision to join them rather than the other way around.

In short, we can advance our current understanding of the relationship between IGOs and international conflict, if we are able to gain a better sense of whether IGOs may have a pacifying influence on a state's foreign relations in general (as opposed to this influence shown in a dyadic context when pairs of states share membership in the same IGOs). Our research results would also become more compelling if we are able to separate the pacifying effects of common interests that motivate states to create or join IGOs in the first place from the pacifying effects stemming from the development of common norms due to their being members of these IGOs. Finally, clarification on the possibility of reversed causality would be helpful. Are peaceful states more likely to join IGOs or are IGOs likely to make their members more peaceful?

### **Alternate Probes**

To answer the last question just raised, an analyst may wish to compare the incidence of a state's conflict involvement before or after it joins some important IGO. For instance, after controlling for other factors that may be pertinent, has the frequency of militarized disputes involving China increased or decreased since it became a UN member in October 1971? Alternatively, one may want to ask whether, compared to the other great powers that were members of the League of Nations, the US had more or fewer militarized disputes during the interwar years. For obvious reasons, however, the conclusions from such investigations will have definite limits.

It would be better to seek an appropriate indicator of states' general acceptance of international principles and their disavowal of assertive unilateralism. It would be problematic to infer a state's commitment to the basic norms of international conduct from the number of IGOs in which it is a member. The number of IGO membership that a state has is a result of both its willingness and its opportunity (Most and Starr, 1989), the latter being in turn a function of factors such as national affluence, length of time since acquiring sovereignty, and the number of countries in one's immediate geographic neighbor (Jacobson *et al.*, 1986).

An indicator of states' orientation toward international rules and their respective tendency to claim exceptionalism or to pursue unilateral policy should reflect willingness and not opportunity, and it should not be based on the number of IGOs it belongs to for the reasons just given. This indicator should point to basic and widely shared principles so that a refusal to commit



to them would be particularly revealing. Ratification of and accession to the various international conventions on human rights seem to offer such a promising indicator. Action or inaction in adopting these conventions representing the general will of the international community should be especially suggestive of different states' relative willingness to subscribe to universal standards regarding the fundamental rights of people everywhere.

Whereas *pro forma* acceptance of these standards may be more symbolic than substantive, a decision not to declare even this *pro forma* acceptance can in itself be highly significant. A reluctance to submit one's national performance to evaluation by international standards and a plea for cultural relativism and uniqueness considerations would imply a more pervasive sense of alienation from the international community and, by extension, a deep skepticism about the worth of IGOs such as in their role in sanctioning norm-breakers, mediating disputes, and promoting common socialization. One would surmise that those states characterized by this orientation should, *ceteris paribus*, be more susceptible to the impulse to resort to unilateral action, including the use of violence, when caught in a dispute. To determine the extent to which IGOs have a pacifying influence on their members, one would want to control for the orientation just described (or its obverse) that shapes the states' pre-disposition to join or abstain from IGOs. To avoid circular reasoning, it would obviously be desirable not to use IGO membership as a measure of this pre-disposition. Rather, one would want to ask how much of the remaining variance in states' involvement in militarized disputes can IGO membership explain after this pre-disposition, based on a measure other than IGO membership, has been introduced as a first-order independent variable.

How can one fruitfully separate the supposed effects of a state *joining* an IGO from that of it *being* a member of an IGO? We have already mentioned that those states, which are pre-disposed toward isolationism or which are deeply alienated from the intentional community, are likely to stay outside of IGOs. Their absence in IGOs is due to selection effects. They may decide on their own accord to eschew membership (e.g., the US in the case of the League of Nations) or, due to their policy conduct, others may object to their admission (e.g., China in the case of the United Nations before October 1971). Joining an IGO can therefore reveal a state's general and initial orientation toward basic international norms and its acceptance of the principles of multilateral diplomacy. Being in an IGO, however, is supposed to have a socialization effect in further strengthening a state's adherence to these norms and principles. The original contributors to the theories of functionalism and regional integration (e.g., Haas, 1968; Mitrany, 1975) surely had in mind this socialization process when they talked about 'spillover effects.' In addition to this socialization process, experience in working together in an IGO is said to promote trust and learning that incline the partner states to become



more mutually responsive and to expand their cooperation in the pursuit of further joint gains.

The functionalist literature also directs attention to the nature of norms being promoted. Although select clubs, such as the European Common Market and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, may facilitate problem solving among its members (who, as already noted, are self-selected to form such IGOs), it is unclear whether (even doubtful that) the norms for mutual adjustment learned by their members in this context will extend to outsiders. The extant literature does not offer much evidence on this question of externalization. Why and to what extent should the norms acquired by an in-group be expected to apply beyond its members? How would these norms developed within an exclusive association help dispute settlement short of war when members of this in-group have a dispute with those from an out-group? By implication, if one is interested in the pacifying effects of IGOs on a state's conflict propensity in general (i.e., monadically), one would have to look to those IGOs with universal membership and generalized principles, especially those that are primarily concerned with international peace and security. This remark in turn means that one needs to differentiate among various IGOs (thus, the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine is not the equivalent of the United Nations). In themselves, aggregate indicators of the number of IGOs to which a state belongs or, for that matter, the duration of its membership in particular IGOs, are not likely to be very informative. Moreover, declaratory statements are not adequate for assessing norm compliance. One would want to have some systematic behavioral evidence.

Where could one then look for such evidence? The Security Council of the United Nations offers one plausible source. It is the premier body charged with the responsibility of maintaining international peace and addressing threats to this peace. It represents an IGO with universal membership. The decision process of the Security Council moreover opens a promising window to assess the extent to which the great powers have come to accept the views and desires of a majority of the international community. Specifically, draft resolutions presented to the 15-member Security Council require at least nine affirmative votes — without a dissenting vote from any of the five permanent members — for passage. Whenever a permanent member casts a veto, it, by definition, over-rides the wishes of a majority of the Council. Whereas most of the Council's business is approved by unanimous support, those rare occasions of veto exercise point to times when a great power feels so strongly about its position that it is willing to oppose the wishes of a majority publicly. These are the times when the norms for mutual adjustment have broken down. Private negotiations are usually undertaken before a draft resolution is presented to the Council for a vote, and these sessions are intended precisely to overcome objections (especially from one of the permanent members with veto power)



that may jeopardize its adoption in a formal vote. Therefore, when a veto is exercised, this occurrence points to a breakdown of these negotiations. The majority feels intensely about its preference to force a public vote even in anticipation of a pending veto. Similarly, the permanent member threatening veto also is strongly committed to its position. It is unwilling to make side-payments to defuse the impasse or delay an open confrontation. It may in fact force and welcome an opportunity to publicize its dissent from and, indeed, defiance against the majority preference.

The record of vetoes in the Security Council can therefore be used to indicate outright opposition to majority preference. Significantly, a permanent member has the option of being absent from or abstaining from a vote when facing an objectionable resolution. In doing so, it acquiesces so that the objectionable resolution still passes without its support. Such acquiescence in turn indicates a certain reluctance to oppose popular resolutions even when a state has serious reservations about them and possesses the formal power to defeat them. The frequency of such acquiescence and, its converse, the incidence of veto exercise should accordingly be informative about the great powers' socialization in IGOs. If this socialization inclining them toward deference to the principle of majority rule and the norms of multilateral diplomacy is supposed to become stronger over time, one would expect a declining incidence of vetoes in the Security Council. Obviously, only the permanent members have veto power. The history of vetoes accordingly can only be used to infer the tendency toward unilateralism for this subset of states. Nevertheless, many of the most devastating and protracted wars since 1945 involved one or more great powers which are permanent members of the Security Council. The logic presented thus far argues that the veto history of the permanent members should go a substantial distance in helping us to understand major conflicts since World War II.

## Descriptive Evidence

Table 1 reports the frequency of vetoes exercised by the five permanent members of the Security Council from 1946 to 2002. It shows clearly cross-sectional and over-time differences in the incidence of this behavior. In the earlier years of the United Nations, the USSR was overwhelmingly responsible for this obstructionism. Starting about 1972, however, the US increasingly went against the Council's majority, so that it became by far the most active permanent member in exercising its veto power.

If the longevity of a country's membership in an IGO is indicative of a more extensive opportunity for being socialized to accept the norms of multilateral diplomacy and mutual partisan adjustment, one should expect the resort to



**Table 1** Summary of vetoes in the security council: February 16, 1946–February 28, 2002<sup>a</sup>

	ROC/PRC <sup>b</sup>	France	USSR/Russia	UK	USA	Total
1946–55	1	2	76	0	0	79
1956–65	0	2	26	3	0	31
1966–75	2	2	7	8	12	31
1976–85	0	9	6	11	34	60
1986–95	0	3	2	8	24	37
1996–2002	2	0	0	0	5	7
Total	5	18	117	30	75	245

<sup>a</sup>Updated summary with the data for February 1946–August 1997 drawn from Bailey and Daws (1998, 239). <sup>b</sup>The Republic of China (Taipei) occupied the China seat until October 25, 1971, when it was replaced by the People's Republic of China (Beijing).

veto to decrease over time. This is indeed the secular trend for the overall number of vetoes cast. The records for the USSR/Russia and US, however, point in contradictory directions. Whereas its declining exercise of veto can be used to support Moscow's increasing association with and/or acceptance of the Council's majority view, the opposite characterization would apply to Washington's rising isolation in this body and its tendency toward unilateral assertiveness. The pattern of US vetoes would not therefore offer *prima facie* evidence in support of the proposition that *being* in an IGO and *continuing* as a member contributes to a greater willingness to subscribe to collective decision-making and hence conflict resolution. Of course, although vetoing an objectionable resolution points to a decision to block majority wish, it is still a legitimate exercise of power in accordance to the provisions of the UN Charter. It is quite a different and more serious matter when a state claims the right to act unilaterally without the Security Council's explicit approval and, indeed, to over-ride the known objection of a majority of its members.

As already noted, it would be warranted to distinguish between the socialization effects of being an IGO member and the initial acceptance of the general norms and principles of international relations that had inclined a state to join IGOs in the first place. Ratification of the principal international covenants on human rights offers appropriate evidence on the latter disposition. Table 2 reports this information for the five permanent members of the Security Council. France, Russia and the UK have ratified all six of the major international conventions on human rights. China has ratified all but one (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). The US has yet to ratify three of the six instruments (conventions protecting people's economic, social and cultural rights, and those protecting the rights of women and children respectively). Although ratification of these





**Table 2** Ratification of major international human rights instruments<sup>a</sup>

	<i>PRC</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Russia</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>USA</i>
<i>International convention</i>					
On the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
On civil and political rights	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
On economic, social and cultural rights	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
On the elimination of discrimination against women	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
On the rights of the child	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

<sup>a</sup>Updated from United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2000* (2000, 48–51), including China's ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2001.

instruments is hardly tantamount to full compliance with the respective convention's provisions, failure to do so after decades of delay is in itself informative about a state's general disposition to subscribe to international rules and norms.

Table 3 offers some descriptive statistics about wars involving the major powers since 1945. The casualties suffered by the opponents of these major powers have undoubtedly been much higher than the fatalities incurred by these countries' military personnel. One notable trend has been a reduction in the major powers' casualty figures and the increasing brevity of wars involving them. Indeed, had it not been for these countries' ability to inflict much higher casualties on their respective opponents, some of these conflicts would not even have qualified for the definition of an interstate war which, according to the Correlates of War Project, must result in more than 1,000 combat deaths among all the belligerents. As a consequence, episodes producing fewer casualties — such as the US invasions of Grenada and Panama — are not included in Table 3. The tendency for wars to become briefer and to involve more lopsided casualty figures among the combatants reflects at least in part the increasing use of air power by the US and, concomitantly, its reluctance to commit large forces to ground warfare since the Vietnam War.

The preceding discussion in turn draws attention to an issue that is often overlooked in the debate about democratic peace. Thus far, the incidence of war (or dispute) involvement is customarily used to substantiate the claim that democracies are more peaceful than autocracies. Naturally and as implied above, this incidence can be a function of the relative power of the belligerents and their respective military strategy. The application of massive air power and an emphasis on special forces operations could quickly overwhelm a much weaker adversary, so that the combined casualty figure does not quite rise to

**Table 3** Interstate wars involving great powers, 1946–2003<sup>a</sup>

	<i>Great-power belligerent</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Duration (months)</i>	<i>Military deaths</i>
Korean	UK	8/29/50–7/27/53	35.0	670
	US	6/27/50–7/27/53	37.0	54,000
	France	1/1/51–7/27/53	30.8	290
	China	10/27/50–7/27/53	33.1	900,000
Russo-Hungary	USSR	12/23/56–11/14/56	0.8	7,500
Sinai	France	10/31/56–11/6/56	0.2	10
	UK	10/31/56–11/6/56	0.2	20
Sino-Indian	China	10/20/62–11/22/62	1.1	500
Vietnam	US	2/7/65–1/27/73	95.6	56,000
Sino-Vietnamese I	China	2/17/79–3/10/79	0.9	13,000
Falklands	UK	3/25/82–6/20/82	2.9	250
Sino-Vietnamese II	China	1/5/87–2/6/87	1.1	1,800
Gulf War	US	1/16/91–4/11/91	3.0	149
	UK	1/16/91–4/11/91	3.0	24
	France	1/16/91–4/11/91	3.0	2
	US	3/26/99–6/10/99	2.6	0
Kosovo	UK	3/26/99–6/10/99	2.6	0
	France	3/26/99–6/10/99	2.6	0
Afghanistan	US	10/7/01–5/1/03	17.8	62
Iraq	US	3/19/03–5/1/03	1.3	140
	UK	3/19/03–5/1/03	1.3	32

<sup>a</sup>Updated from Singer and Small (1979, 92–95). The termination dates for the war in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom) and Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom) were based on statements by George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, respectively, that ‘major combat’ was over as of May 1, 2003. The casualty figures for these conflicts include non-combat as well as combat deaths, including those due to friendly fire. These figures continued to mount after May 1, 2003, so that by early November of the same year, some 382 US troops had died in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

meet the COW criterion for qualification as an interstate war. The result is that the incidence of war involvement by such a technologically superior state appears to be lower than it would have otherwise been, a phenomenon due more to this state’s ability to subdue its foes quickly and to minimize its own casualty rather than any inherent reluctance on its part to engage in foreign conflict or resort to military force. If, instead of focusing on the incidence of war involvement, one were to use bilateral casualty figures to assess the claim of democratic peace, one is likely to come to the conclusion that democracies are *not* more restrained than their autocratic counterparts in the application of deadly force against enemy combatants or even civilian populations (e.g., Hiroshima, Nagasaki). In this paper, however, we will follow convention and focus on the incidence of war involvement rather than casualty figures.



## Analytic Concerns

Even a casual glance at the data contained in the three tables described so far alerts one to several serious challenges to causal inference. The number of cases is small both in regard to the countries being examined and the wars being studied. The indicators serving as the independent variables are crude and do not provide for sensitive readings that show differences across cases or over time. Moreover, the observations are not temporally ordered so that, for instance, one may be able to conclude that acceptance of human rights accord at time  $t$  dampens the incidence of war at time  $t + 1$ .

At the same time, these problems are not unique. Wars *are* rare events and most countries in fact do not get embroiled in these clashes. In fact, only a relatively small number of states have fought wars since World War II — with a few of them, such as Israel, Vietnam, India, and the US, in turn being a party to a large share of these conflicts. As a consequence, there are many zero entries in the data set for war involvement — most states manage to stay in peace in most years. It is a rare state that gets itself into war, and even a more atypical one that gets involved in wars repeatedly.

Naturally, any study of the incidence of war involvement assumes that the war involvements being counted are comparable. Thus, for instance, the Korean War is treated as an occurrence similar to the Falklands War. Despite their obvious differences in many respects (including the magnitude of casualties and the number of belligerents), these conflicts are treated as members of a homogenous class because they have met certain qualitative and quantitative criteria. One encounters similar analytic treatments of IGOs so that, for instance, shared membership in the International Union of the Pruth River (1866) is taken to be of equal significance as shared membership in the League of Nations (1919) or the Nordic Council (1952). Again, however, these institutions all meet certain minimal criteria (Wallace and Singer, 1970). Thus, the operational definition of an IGO is such that it must schedule regular meetings among the representatives of its member states and provide for established procedures for reaching joint decisions. It also features an ongoing staff and continuing budget. These features give an IGO a certain structure and permanence absent in the conduct of traditional diplomacy.

The relevant criteria, however, may be more murky in other situations. For instance, should the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union be considered a military alliance and a preferential trade arrangement, respectively? And should they be double-counted as an IGO? If so, would one not risk confusing the pacific effects of IGOs with those that may be due to military alliance and preferential trade? Such ambiguities are not uncommon. Surely in our case, ratification of international human rights accords can mean both a professed respect for these fundamental rights and an implied



inclination to subscribe to broader international norms and to eschew assertive unilateralism.

Of course, no one seriously believes that the number of IGOs in which two states have shared membership this year will affect their probability of staying in peace next year. That is, the implied causal lag of 1 year is a matter of analytic convenience or convention, when the underlying theory being studied offers little guidance for temporal specification. When pushed, most are also likely to acknowledge that the relevant causal impact is probably not additive or linear. There is little empirical or theoretical reason to expect that if two states join a common IGO, this joint membership will have the same amount of causal impact on their peaceful relationship whether it be the first or the 99th. The available data are often lumpy and static, and the theoretical expectations point to general tendencies and differences in causal direction while lacking much specificity in terms of timing and magnitude. This analysis shares these flaws.

### **Probability Estimates**

Accordingly, our analytic attention is directed toward making statements about general heuristics rather than deriving specifications about particular algorithms. Moreover, since wars are rare events as already noted, we are attracted to probabilistic approaches for studying infrequent occurrences. The Poisson distribution is suitable for such purpose (e.g., Hayes, 1973). It has, for instance, been used to study deaths caused by horse kicks in the Prussian army.

Other Poisson applications include studies on particle emission due to radioactive disintegration, the spatial distribution of bombs hitting London's neighborhoods, and the pattern of telephone connections to wrong numbers (Feller, 1968, 160–164). In the field of international relations, Richardson (1960) used this approach to analyze the frequency of wars. More recently, others have undertaken it to study a variety of phenomena such as coups d'état, military belligerence, and alliance formation (e.g., Putnam, 1967; Midlarsky, 1970; Li and Thompson, 1975; McGowan and Rood, 1975; Chan, 1978).

Without getting into technical details here (see King, 1989, for an extensive discussion), the standard question asked in applying the Poisson distribution to a phenomenon is the extent to which the frequency count of some event or object of interest is statistically different from a random occurrence. How much significance, statistical and substantive, should one attach to an apparent departure from the normal pattern? How different have the occurrences been between two periods or two cases? In this analysis, the occurrences being analyzed are of course wars involving the great powers, and the cases being



compared are these great powers. Are those with fewer vetoes and more rights ratification also associated with fewer wars? Do temporal shifts in veto frequencies coincide with changes in the incidence of war involvement?

China did not join the United Nations until October 1971. The year 1972 coincidentally offers an approximate watershed when the US replaced the USSR as the state that most frequently resorted to the use of veto to block unwanted Security Council resolutions. For the years before 1972, one might want to ask whether the USSR was more likely to involve itself in wars than its Western counterparts. One would expect Moscow to have a higher incidence of war involvement, if its frequent resort to veto was indicative of its poorer assimilation into the IGO norms of partisan mutual adjustment in comparison to the others. The top panel of Table 4 reports the pertinent Poisson probabilities based on comparisons of the incidence of Soviet, British, and American war involvement with that of the French (whose historical record is therefore used as a benchmark). More specifically, the figures are the cumulative probabilities for testing the proposition that the USSR, the UK, and the US each had two or fewer war involvements.

None of the probabilities are significant, a result which seems in turn to be meaningful. Why? If those states that have become better socialized in terms of the collective decision processes of IGOs are more peaceful, we should expect the USSR to have a higher incidence of war involvement than the French. The available data actually contradict this expectation, as Moscow had fewer war involvement than its Western counterparts during the 1946–71 period.

What about the more recent period of 1972–2003? Because the US became the leading state in the exercise of its veto prerogative, one would expect that the incidence of Washington's war involvement to be higher than that of Paris (which is again used as a benchmark in the bottom panel of Table 4). The Poisson probability estimate indeed points to a statistically

**Table 4** Poisson probabilities of war involvement

	<i>Cumulative probability</i>
<i>1946–1971</i>	
UK (2) compared to France (2)	0.68
US (2) compared to France (2)	0.68
USSR (1) compared to France (2)	0.41
<i>1972–2003</i>	
UK (4) compared to France (2)	0.95
US (4) compared to France (2)	0.95
China (2) compared to France (2)	0.68
USSR/Russia (0) compared to France (2)	0.14



significant finding (at the 0.05 level) that warrants the rejection of the hypothesis that Washington has had fewer war involvements than Paris (or, almost equivalently, affirming the hypothesis that the former has had more war involvements during 1972–2003 than the latter). The available data appear to also confirm the same expectation in the sense that Moscow and Beijing — which had fewer vetoes than Paris during this period — had either the same or fewer war involvements than Paris. That the probabilities estimates for Moscow and Beijing are not significant may in itself be meaningful because, on the basis of their respective veto record, one would not expect the incidence of war involvement on the part of these two countries to depart significantly from the French level.

This observation, however, in turn leads us to notice that the British incidence of war involvement during 1972–2003 was equivalent to that of the US frequency, and it was significantly higher than that of the French. This pattern is intriguing. London had cast more vetoes than Paris but fewer than Washington. Concomitantly, London had ratified the same number of human rights accords as Paris, and this ratification has been substantially higher than for Washington. The ratification of human rights accords is used here as an indication of the general disposition to adhere to multilateral norms. Given the same record on this variable, our logic of inquiry would assign the observed difference in war involvement between London and Paris to the differences in their becoming more socialized with respect to the UN's collective decision processes. That is, the difference in their war incidence would be attributed to their differences in veto behavior. This attribution, however, runs into trouble when it is interpreted in the context of the results obtained for the 1946–71 period. As already noted, although the USSR was the most frequent user of veto power, it did not engage in more wars than its Western counterparts. This contradiction would call into question the supposed effects of veto frequency on war involvement.

Put more succinctly, the combination of probability results warns us about the dangers of irrelevance and idiosyncrasy. Irrelevance becomes a concern when different stimuli produce the same outcome, whereas idiosyncrasy is a problem when the same stimulus produces different outcomes. Both would of course suggest unwarranted causal attribution. The results in Table 4 pose a threat of irrelevance because both high and low regard for international human rights accords have, on the part of the British and the Americans, produced the same incidence of war involvement during 1972–2003. At the same time, idiosyncrasy becomes an issue when a high frequency of veto exercise has been associated with both low war involvement (for the USSR during 1946–71) and high war involvement (for the US during 1972–2003). As well, the same regard for human rights accords has produced low war involvement (for the French during 1972–2003) and high war involvement (for the British during the same



period). These results therefore fail to provide a proper basis for inferring any systematic causal pattern.

## Conclusion

We had wanted to determine the effects of IGO socialization on a state's avoidance of foreign belligerence, and to separate these effects from those due to an original pre-disposition toward peaceful foreign relations that inclines a state to join an IGO in the first place. The veto behavior of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and their respective record of acceding to international covenants on human rights were used to approximate these two separate plausible sources for dampening its involvement in interstate wars.

The results of probability analysis, unfortunately, point to contradictory interpretations. Neither of the two factors examined is seemingly capable of capturing fully the variations in war involvement on the part of the five major powers, and neither appears to be consistently associated with the latter. Yet while null results are always disappointing, they also suggest the need for developing more appropriate measures and sensible designs to pursue further those concerns that had motivated this paper originally.

As already noted, wars are rare phenomena and this paper only offers a coarse-gauge analysis. Moreover, it concerns only the great powers which are obviously a very special group that is distinct from the rest of the inter-state community. Therefore, what we learn about this subset of countries may not be generalizable to the majority of states. As well, what is true about the most extreme form of interstate conflict (i.e., wars with 1,000 or more combat fatalities) may not be equally applicable to interstate incidents at a lower level of tension, especially those that did not involve the use of deadly force. Finally, more powerful statistical methods can be applied to study time-series data with the intent of clarifying the possibility of reciprocal causality and discerning the temporal leads or lags in the causal pattern. Vector-autoregression comes to mind, for example, as a technique to study the overtime interactions in a state's changing IGO membership and its involvement in interstate disputes.

With extensions, elaborations or improvements such as those just mentioned, analysts should be in a better position to demonstrate the respective impact of the initial impulse to join IGOs and that of the socialization effects of participating in IGOs on the members states' ability and/or willingness to avoid foreign conflict. It is also possible that this future research will show that the former impact tends to dominate the latter impact, so that IGOs do not independently cause states to become more peaceful.



Rather, the causal arrow may be reversed so that peaceful states are more likely to join IGOs in the first place. The other possibility is that both causal mechanisms are operative: that peaceful states are more likely to join IGOs and that IGOs in turn socialize their members to be better at peaceful dispute resolution. The puzzle suggested by these possibilities presents a worthy analytic challenge to all those who are interested in understanding better the basis for enduring international peace. Surely, it behooves those following Kant's intellectual legacy to inquire more deeply into the empirical and historical bases of 'pacific unions.'

## Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Studies Association — West annual meeting at Las Vegas, October 10–11, 2003.

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