

# War as an Internal Information Problem

Extremely Preliminary Draft

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## Abstract

To explain costly conflict, rationalist international relations scholars have often discussed “information problems”, which are usually characterized as situations in which one or more states have perfect but private information about their capabilities, resolve, or other important conflict-relevant characteristics, but lack the incentives to honestly reveal this information to other states. However, what if a state has imperfect information about its own characteristics? This paper presents a model in which state-level agents are responsible for choosing whether to enter a conflict or not, but sub-state level actors (government agencies, private actors, etc.) have the private information needed in order for states to evaluate these options correctly. If these sub-state actors have their own agendas, which may or may not align exactly with the state-level agent, this creates the possibility that intrastate misrepresentation may lead states to engage in costly conflict that they would otherwise not pursue if they were fully informed. Thus, war can sometimes be a consequence of internal information problems, rather than misrepresentation by another state of its characteristics.

## Introduction

One of the most prominent explanations for why war occurs, despite its destructive costs, is incomplete information. States are posited to know their own capabilities, resolve, and var-

ious other conflict-related characteristics, but cannot be trusted to reveal this information honestly, because such revelation would affect the terms of any peaceful bargain. As a consequence, states faced with incomplete information about another state are forced to “gamble”, making offers or demands to another state based on guesses about the other state’s conflict-related characteristics, knowing that there is some probability of war if they guess incorrectly.

But what does it mean to say that a state has private information? The “state”, after all, is not a unitary actor; instead, leaders make decisions on behalf of the state, with the particular domestic institutional structure determining who leaders are likely to be, and the particular incentives they will face to maximize their chances of political survival (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Indeed, while the rationalist conflict literature has historically sought to explain war through features of interstate bargaining, recent work in the rationalist tradition has begun to explore the possibility that war might instead be the result of *agency problems* - i.e., cases where the incentives of the decision-makers responsible for entering a war differ from the incentives of the country as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

However, while this literature has provided considerable insight by exploring the interests of decision-makers responsible for state-level choices about war, work in it has either assumed complete information (Jackson and Morelli 2007, Krainin and Slinkman 2017), or has adopted the standard conventions about “states” holding private information (Fearon 2008, Krainin and Ramsay 2021, Davis 2021). If we instead take the decision-maker framework to its logical conclusion, it becomes clear that the issue is not what information the “state” has, but what information the “leader” has. Given that the leader is not gathering conflict-related information by themselves, this creates another level of strategic interaction

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<sup>1</sup>Jackson and Morelli 2011 discuss this in a survey of the rationalist conflict literature.

that needs to be evaluated in order to understand the genesis of conflict: namely, the strategic dynamic between the leader and the intelligence agencies, diplomats, and other military groups that are responsible for gathering conflict-relevant information.

This paper develops a model that links a simple representation of this internal information problem to a standard bargaining model of conflict. In so doing, it demonstrates that when the preferences with respect to war of the leader and the intelligence agency are not identical - i.e. when they exhibit different “political biases”, in the terminology of Jackson and Morelli (2007) - the transfer of information from the agency to the leader can be impeded, both regarding other states’ characteristics and about *their own* state. In the benchmark model, it can thus be shown that war can occur as a result of a leader’s uncertainty about their own state’s characteristics, even if they are completely informed about the other state.

Thus, this paper contributes to our understanding of conflict by demonstrating how “internal information problems” - i.e. situations of incomplete information transfer *within* a state - can be a proximate cause of war within a bargaining framework. This opens up space for considerably more discussion in future work of the particular ways in which internal information transfer can be impeded, which could leverage the much broader theoretical and empirical literature on information transfer within bureaucracies.

## **Theories of Bureaucracy and Information Transfer**

At its core, the theory advanced in this paper is one of bureaucratic politics; after all, the intelligence agencies are bureaucracies tasked with gathering the relevant conflict-related information and also often with implementation of various directives. The formal theory literature more broadly has explored many aspects of information transfer within bureaucracies

in detail. Building off of work that examined information aggregation and communication in generalized committee settings (Austen-Smith 1990, 1992, Austen-Smith and Banks 1996, Austen-Smith and Feddersen 2005, 2009, Meirowitz 2006, Galeotti et al. 2013), formal theory research on bureaucracy has usually employed cheap talk communication models (Crawford and Sobel 1982) to explore a wide range of strategic situations specific to bureaucratic politics. For instance, recent work has explored information transfer in cases of policymaking with multiple agencies (Bils 2020), and disagreements within agencies (Hirsch 2016); a review of some of this literature can be found in Gailmard and Patty (2012).

Much of this research, however, discusses problems with somewhat distinct characteristics to the subject of this paper; for instance, a common feature of work in this domain has been a focus on principal-agent problems of delegation, wherein the agency both has specialized information and is responsible for implementing the particulars of a policy. This dynamic prompts a number of interesting questions such as the optimal degree of delegation, the implications of hierarchy, etc. that are not explored in this paper, which assumes that the leader is the ultimate figure with decision-making authority over conflict, and simply relies on the intelligence agency for advice.

Consequently, the key result from this literature that informs this paper was largely present in Crawford and Sobel (1982); namely, that the level of information transfer between parties varies inversely with the divergence in preferences between them, when such information cannot be verified and messages are cost-free. This paper explores this dynamic, with the degree of preference divergence determined by the “political bias” (Jackson and Morelli 2007) of the intelligence agency. This very simple representation of bureaucratic politics is useful for introducing the possibility that “internal information problems” might lead to war in a bargaining framework, but future work could productively explore incorporating more of

the complexity of the bureaucratic literature into the kind of “two-level” game structure this paper presents.

## **Military Agencies, Information, and Conflict**

Discussions of bureaucracy have long been a part of the broader conflict literature. Beginning with Allison’s work on bureaucratic politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison 1969, 1971, Allison and Halperin 1972), which was followed by various critiques of his account (Krasner 1972, Art 1973, Welch 1992, Bendor and Hammond 1992), the first wave of this scholarship focused on the parochial interests of bureaucratic agencies who might work to shape policy in ways that would personally benefit them. Other work in a somewhat similar tradition has focused on civil-military relations (Gelpi and Feaver 2002, Feaver 2003, Feaver and Gelpi 2004, Horowitz and Stam 2014). As a general matter, this work has examined bureaucracies by treating them directly as actors involved in the policymaking and implementation process, and then evaluating how their interests might therefore shape foreign policy.

Some recent work, however, has begun to explore the territory that this paper explores; namely, the role of bureaucracies in providing information to leaders who then ultimately make policy decisions about conflict (Brooks 2008, Saunders 2017, Schub 2020, Jost 2020). Brooks (2008), for instance, explores civil-military dimensions of information provision, while Saunders (2017) explores the role of experienced advisers and leaders in a behavioral theory of information aggregation in conflict situations.

Amongst this recent literature, Jost (2020) and Schub (2020) are the most closely related to this paper. Jost (2020) looks specifically at how variation in the structure of China’s bureau-

cracy can help to explain variation in Chinese state-level miscalculations in foreign policy decisions. The paper introduces a typology of political-bureaucratic relationships - short-handed as “national security institutions” - and argues that certain kinds of institutions are prone to restricting information flow in a way that leads to leaders having incorrect beliefs that result in foreign policy blunders. This explores very similar substantive territory to this paper’s model, but with a higher-level empirical bent that is more theoretically grounded in behavioral theories of misperception and psychological bias.

Schub (2020) is even more closely related to this project; it grounds its analysis in the rationalist literature on conflict and information, and notes at the outset that “time constraints mean [leaders] cannot [acquire information] on their own, and rarely have the requisite information at their fingertips. Instead, they delegate information-collection tasks to senior advisers who convey this information during advisory processes.” (Schub 2020, p.1) Thus, like this paper, Schub (2020) explores the information-provision role of bureaucracies within a rationalist framework; however, it focuses on the ways in which different kinds of bureaucracies possess and provide particular kinds of information depending on “where they sit”, and how the level of uncertainty they express corresponds to the kind of information they are responsible for providing. The empirical work and theory in Schub (2020) thus addresses a fundamentally different question than this paper’s topic of inquiry, which is not about what kinds of information bureaucracies have and can convey, but instead focuses on the strategic environment that conditions when bureaucracies have the incentives to convey information to the leader honestly.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>An illustrative example of this distinction can be found in Schub (2020, p.3), where it notes that during the Iraq War, George W. Bush limited the State Department’s input, distorting the administration’s assessments of postwar stability. What this paper is instead interested in is *why* the Bush administration would sideline the State Department.

## Domestic Foundations of Interstate Bargaining

One strand of the rationalist literature on agency problems has focused on the *implications* of a divergence between leader incentives and the general public, rather than on the sources of that divergence. Jackson and Morelli (2007), for instance, simply specifies exogenously the degree of “political bias” of the pivotal agent - where political bias is conceptualized as the weighting this agent places on the benefits and costs of war relative to the country overall. Work in this strand of the literature has been very useful for understanding things like the effects of political bias on leader selection and bargaining (Jackson and Morelli 2007), including bargaining with biased autocrats (Kravinin and Slinkman 2017). However, it generally brackets the question of the sources of the agency problem; as Jackson and Morelli (2007) puts it, “Political bias essentially embodies anything that might lead to different incentives for the critical decision maker relative to the society as a whole”. (Jackson and Morelli, p.1354)

Other parts of the literature have attempted to directly explain interstate bargaining failure through features of intrastate politics. For instance, a collection of leader-centric theories in the literature (e.g. Tarar 2006, Goemans and Fey 2009, Debs and Goemans 2010) - often described as theories of “diversionary war” - illustrate that leaders may sometimes have incentives to go to war to retain office even though war destroys value. In these theories, the operating logic is a kind of “internal commitment problem”; the leader cannot be compensated to avoid pursuing an inefficient gamble to stay in power, as constituents will have no incentive to follow-through with compensation after the choice is made not to go to war.

Davis (2021), in contrast, grounds the agency problem in distributive politics. War has distributive implications - some groups gain from war (like military contractors, or those with

a bigger stake in some contest policy), while others experience the greatest costs of conflict (e.g. military conscripts) - and leaders are unlikely to weight each group equally in their political calculus. This could theoretically open up space for a leader to develop such a strong political bias towards war that no amount of interstate transfer could prevent it.

However, Davis (2021) demonstrates that this is only possible when there exist costs to redistributing between domestic parties. In the absence of such costs to side payments, the “inefficiency problem” underlying the bargaining model of conflict would simply be relocated intrastate and left unresolved; even an agent biased by distributive politics could benefit by pursuing an aggregate welfare improving peaceful bargain and then simply transferring value from the beneficiaries of peace to the beneficiaries of war, resulting in a Pareto-improvement. This side payment logic has a close theoretical relationship to discussions of “indivisibility problems” in the interstate conflict literature; Fearon (1995), for instance, suggests that side payments or linkages with other issues “should have the effect of making any issues in dispute perfectly divisible” (Fearon 1995, p.389).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Davis (2021) argument that “redistributive frictions” can be a cause of war can be characterized as describing a kind of “internal indivisibility problem” that can ultimately give rise to interstate bargaining failure.<sup>4</sup>

With internal commitment problems and indivisibility problems explored in existing literature, only internal information problems remain if the classic tripartite description of interstate bargaining failures from Fearon (1995) is to be mirrored at the domestic level. This paper thus seeks to finish the job.

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<sup>3</sup>Kennard et al. (n.d.) also demonstrates that in an interstate context, costless side payments ensure that “the outcome of bargaining [will be] invariant to the distribution of power among the bargaining parties” (Kennard et al. n.d., p.10), but it does not frame this in terms of indivisibility.

<sup>4</sup>Indeed, this was the original title that the author gave the paper, before every reviewer and conference participant who read the paper told him they hated this framing.



# Model

## Set up

The model outlined in this paper is a simple representation of a cheap talk information problem embedded in a standard take-it-or-leave-it crisis bargaining model. There are leaders of two states,  $A$  and  $B$ . They are bargaining over some issue with value normalized to 1;  $A$  makes an offer  $x \in [0, 1]$  to  $B$ , where  $x$  is the value captured by the leader of state  $B$ , and  $B$  chooses to either Accept or Reject that offer. If they Reject, war occurs.

If war occurs, then state  $A$  wins with probability  $p_A$ , and state  $B$  wins with probability  $p_B = 1 - p_A$ . Each state has war capabilities  $c_i \in \mathbb{R}$ , which determines the probability of winning the war according to a simple contest function, i.e.:

$$p_A(c_A, c_B) = \frac{c_A}{c_A + c_B}$$

If war occurs, both countries pay cost  $c$ , representing the destructive costs of conflict. If they win the war, they thus get the full value of the issue minus the cost of fighting; so,  $1 - c$ .

In the benchmark version of the model, we assume that state  $B$ 's leader has complete information about *both* their state's capabilities and state  $A$ 's capabilities. We also assume that state  $A$ 's leader knows state  $B$ 's capabilities, but that they are uncertain about *their own* state's capabilities. This implausible assumption is made to clarify the result that war can emerge *entirely* from uncertainty about own-state capabilities, even in the absence of any uncertainty about the other state, and with that other state's leader having complete information. It would be quite unusual (though not necessarily impossible) for another state to have *better* information about state  $A$  than state  $A$ 's leaders do, but it is useful to assume

this for the model clarity. Similarly, we also assume that the leaders of state  $A$  and state  $B$  are “politically unbiased” for the sake of focusing attention on the *informational* channel that produces bargaining failure.

Finally, we assume that state  $A$  has an intelligence agency  $I$  that is *politically biased*; that is, they weight war success at  $B_I \in \mathbb{R}^+$  instead of 1. For the benchmark version of the model, we also assume that they are politically biased *in favor* of war, so  $B_I > 1$ .

At the beginning of the game, the intelligence agency learns whether or not state  $A$ 's capabilities are high ( $H$ ), medium ( $M$ ), or low ( $L$ ), with  $L = 0$ , which have prior probabilities  $\pi_H$ ,  $\pi_M$ , and  $\pi_L$  respectively.  $I$  then chooses to send a signal  $m_I$  of  $H, M$ , or  $L$  to the leader of state  $A$ . The leader of state  $A$  observes this signal before deciding what offer  $x$  to make to the leader of state  $B$ . The timeline of the game is as follows:

1. Nature determines whether state  $A$ 's capabilities are  $H$ ,  $M$ , or  $L$
2.  $I$  then observes Nature's choice, and decides which signal to send between  $H$ ,  $M$ , and  $L$
3. The leader of state  $A$  observes  $I$ 's signal and chooses an offer  $x$
4. The leader of state  $B$  observes the offer  $x$ , as well as state  $A$ 's capabilities, and then decides whether to Accept the offer, or Reject, leading to war

## **Analysis**

We analyze the model by determining the Perfect Bayesian Nash Equilibria (PBNE). We can start with  $B$ 's choice of whether to Accept or Reject, which will be conditional on whether state  $A$  is  $H$ ,  $M$ , or  $L$ . We know that their probability of victory in each case is:

$$p_B(c_A) = \begin{cases} \frac{c_B}{H+c_B} & \text{if } c_A = H \\ \frac{c_B}{M+c_B} & \text{if } c_A = M \\ \frac{c_B}{0+c_B} = 1 & \text{if } c_A = L \end{cases}$$

Which means their expected utility from war is as follows:

$$EU_B(c_A) = \begin{cases} \left(\frac{c_B}{H+c_B}\right) - c & \text{if } c_A = H \\ \left(\frac{c_B}{M+c_B}\right) - c & \text{if } c_A = M \\ 1 - c & \text{if } c_A = L \end{cases}$$

Thus, in any PBNE, they will Accept an offer  $x$  whenever  $x \geq EU_B(c_A)$ , and Reject the offer otherwise. This characterizes the leader of state  $B$ 's equilibrium strategy.

The leader of state  $A$  knows  $B$ 's strategy, and thus knows that there are three possible offers that will make the leader of state  $B$  exactly indifferent between accepting or rejecting, i.e.

$$x^*(c_A) = \begin{cases} p_B(H) - c & \text{if } c_A = H \\ p_B(M) - c & \text{if } c_A = M \\ 1 - c & \text{if } c_A = L \end{cases}$$

The leader of state  $A$  will never make an offer different from one of these three in equilibrium; offering a different amount than one of these values does not produce any gain and can increase the probability of conflict. This leads to the following values from each offer for

the leader of state  $A$  if the offer is accepted:

$$EU_A(x^*(c_A)|Accept) = \begin{cases} p_A(H) + c & \text{if } c_A = H \\ p_A(M) + c & \text{if } c_A = M \\ +c & \text{if } c_A = L \end{cases}$$

Before we can go any further in evaluating the leader of state  $A$ 's equilibrium strategy, we need to consider the incentives of the intelligence agency  $I$ . Because of  $I$ 's political bias in favor of war, we will assume that they prefer to go to war over the peaceful bargains characterized by  $x^*(H)$  or  $x^*(M)$ , i.e. we assume:

$$EU_I(H) = B_I p_A(H) - c > p_A(H) + c$$

$$EU_I(M) = B_I p_A(M) - c > p_A(M) + c$$

However, since  $p_A(L) = 0$  by construction, they clearly prefer not to fight when state  $A$  capabilities are  $L$ . This creates some degree of preference overlap between  $I$  and the leader of  $A$ .

Given this, we can consider  $I$ 's equilibrium message conditional on the observed state of the world, i.e. conditional on their private information about state  $A$ 's capabilities. When state  $A$  has low capabilities ( $L$ ),  $I$  wants state  $A$  to make an offer that avoids war, and  $I$  and state  $A$ 's interests are aligned; they can thus reveal this information in equilibrium.

However, consider a possible equilibrium strategy for  $I$  of complete truth-telling, i.e.  $I$  sends a message of  $H$  when observing  $H$  and a message of  $M$  when observing  $M$ .<sup>5</sup> This conjectured

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<sup>5</sup>An equivalent strategy in this game would have  $I$  send  $M$  when observing  $H$  and send  $H$  when observing  $M$ ; as long as these strategies are known, this is also perfectly informative and equivalent to truth-telling.

strategy would lead to the following best response for the leader of state A:

$$\sigma_A = \begin{cases} x^*(H) & \text{if } m_I = H \\ x^*(M) & \text{if } m_I = M \\ x^*(L) & \text{if } m_I = L \end{cases}$$

However, if this is the leader of state A's strategy,  $I$  prefers to deviate upon observing  $M$  to signalling  $m_I = H$ ; this will lead the leader of state A to propose an offer that is too low to state  $B$ , resulting in the leader of state  $B$  rejecting the offer, and war occurring. Since we have assumed  $I$  prefers war to these peaceful bargains defined by these equilibrium offers, truth-telling is thus not incentive compatible for  $I$ .  $I$  must then pool on signalling  $H$  (or equivalently, on  $M$ ) when observing  $H$  or  $M$ .

This leads to two possible equilibria, depending on parameter values. Upon observing a signal of  $H$ , the leader of state A only knows that  $c_A \neq L$ . Via Bayes' rule, this implies:

$$p_A(H|m_I = H) = \frac{\pi_H}{\pi_H + \pi_M}$$

and

$$p_A(M|m_I = H) = \frac{\pi_M}{\pi_H + \pi_M}$$

They must then make a decision of whether to offer  $x^*(H)$  or  $x^*(M)$ , with the first offer creating a possibility of war if the state of the world is actually  $c_A = M$ , and the second sacrificing value from the peaceful bargain if the state of the world is actually  $c_A = H$ . They thus choose  $x^*(H)$  if:

$$(p_A(H|m_I = H))(p_A(H) + c) + (1 - p_A(H|m_I = H))(p_A(M) - c) > p_A(M) + c$$

Assuming this is the case for the purposes of this paper, we have the following proposition:

**Proposition 1.** *War occurs with positive probability under previously specified parameter conditions, despite the fact that the leader of state A has no uncertainty about state B's capabilities, and the leader of state A has complete information.*

*Proof.* Proof largely follows from preceding discussion. Strategies for each player are:

$$\sigma_I = (m_I(H), m_I(M), m_I(L)) = (H, H, L)$$

$$\sigma_A = x = (x^*(H)|m_I = H, x \in [0, 1]|m_I = M, x^*(L)|m_I = L)$$

$$\sigma_B = \begin{cases} \text{Accept} & \text{if } x = x^*(c_A) \\ \text{Reject} & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

This equilibrium holds for any off equilibrium path beliefs that the leader of state A might hold conditional on observing  $m_I = M$ . □

This is one of the core results of the paper; war can occur entirely as the result of an internal information problem where the leader of state A faces uncertainty about its own state's characteristics.

Next, we can consider what happens when we eliminate the political bias of the intelligence agency; i.e. set  $B_I = 1$ . This leads to the following proposition.

**Proposition 2.** *If the intelligence agency is unbiased, and thus their preferences overlap exactly with the leader of state A, then there is a PBNE in which truth-telling always occurs, and peace is always the outcome.*

*Proof.* Consider the conjecture:

$$\sigma_I = (m_I(H), m_I(M), m_I(L)) = (H, M, L)$$

$$\sigma_A = x = (x^*(H)|m_I = H, x^*(M)|m_I = M, x^*(L)|m_I = L)$$

$$\sigma_B = \begin{cases} \textit{Accept} & \text{if } x = x^*(c_A) \\ \textit{Reject} & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Now that  $I$  incentives are aligned with the leader of state  $A$ , they can not do any better by changing their message. The leader of state  $A$  is choosing optimally given full information about their capabilities, and given the need to make the leader of state  $B$  indifferent between *Accept* and *Reject*. The leader of state  $B$  is also best responding.  $\square$

This shows that the key characteristic that produces war as a result of an internal information problem is a wedge in war preferences between  $I$  and the leader of state  $A$  caused by  $I$ 's political bias; this result is in line with general results in Crawford and Sobel (1982).

## **A Speculative Example: The Trump Administration**

It is probably not too much of a stretch to suggest that former President Trump was less informed on issues of foreign policy than most of his predecessors. Bracketing for the moment the question of whether the overall direction of his foreign policy was wise - and it does have some defenders (Blackwill 2019) - he would routinely misstate features of international law, other state's laws and characteristics, and features of the United States itself.

Part of the reason for this lack of information is that former President Trump regularly ignored intelligence briefings and the advice of the people he had appointed to head various agencies.<sup>6</sup> While part of the explanation for this is surely behavioral, this paper raises the question of whether or not at least part of it can be explained by strategic considerations.

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<sup>6</sup>See "Willful Ignorance: Inside President Trump's Troubled Intelligence Briefings", Time Magazine, February 5 2019.

Consider that by the end of his presidency, an extremely large number of former President Trump's former senior foreign policy advisors had become public critics of Trump and his foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> Bracketing as well the justifications for these critiques, it seems fairly clear that these officials did not share Donald Trump's foreign policy preferences; there are plenty of stories of senior advisors working to shape what information was put before former President Trump in order to shape his foreign policy decisions, culminating with one case where Gary Cohn actually stole documents from his desk to keep him from leaving trade deals.<sup>8</sup>

What this paper suggests is that in that environment, there is an argument that it would be strategically sounds to disregard the information being provided to you by your advisors and agencies, because honest information revelation is less likely to occur with minimal overlap in preferences between the advisors and the decision-maker. This of course does not account for the role that such information might play in reshaping foreign policy preferences, and is not an attempt to discount the importance of non-rational factors that might have contributed to former President Trump's foreign policy ignorance; nonetheless, it is a potentially illustrative example of a phenomenon that may play out less observably in other contexts.

The ultimate implication of this paper's model is that the risk of war may have been higher because of the disconnect between former President Trump and his advisors; if they were instead more aligned with his preferences, there may have been a higher degree of information transfer, in a way that would reduce the probability that misperceptions on former President Trump's part would lead to war.

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<sup>7</sup>"The long list of Trump administration officials turned critics." CNN, June 5 2020.

<sup>8</sup>Business Insider, September 26 2018



## Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated that internal information problems can be a proximate cause of war. These can occur when the intelligence agency that collects information on conflict-related information does not have identical preferences to the decision-making agent (i.e. the leader) responsible for deciding whether or not to go to war. The resulting miscalculation can be about another state's characteristics, or even about the state's *own* characteristics, demonstrating a new way in which internal domestic politics can result in interstate conflict.

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