1 Introduction
Why Great Powers Intervene

Why do great powers intervene in some revolutionary civil wars but not in others, and how do intervening great powers choose sides – sometimes aiding the government and other times the opposition?

During the 2011 Arab Spring, protests against the Libyan government escalated into armed clashes between Muammar Gaddafi and opposition militias. The so-called permanent Western three members (P3) of the UN Security Council (UNSC) – France, the UK, and the US – responded by pushing through a resolution to authorize an air campaign and naval blockade to protect civilians in Benghazi. French president Nicolas Sarkozy declared, "France decided to play its part in history . . . to protect the civilian population from the murderous madness of a regime that is killing its own people [and] has lost all legitimacy" (*Reuters*, March 19, 2011). In a matter of weeks, the US, France, and the UK launched a direct intervention, which was touted as "*the* test case for the responsibility to protect," one that would prove the value of the doctrine for protecting vulnerable populations (Wester, 2020, 5–6; see also Bellamy et al., 2011).

However, the P3 did not protect *other* civilian populations from Arab Spring crackdowns. The US-backed Yemeni government suppressed the "Revolution of Dignity." Yemen's authoritarian ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh, fired on and killed dozens of protesters. Rather than threaten Saleh with force, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton merely called on the government to "exercise maximum restraint, refrain from violence, and permit citizens to freely and peacefully express their views." Washington continued to support the embattled authoritarian government as a vital regional ally in the global war on terror (quoted in Sharp, 2011, 4).[1]

[1] The US helped facilitate the strongman's retirement a year later in accordance with the Saudi/Gulf Cooperation Council plan for a managed transition; all five permanent members of the UNSC (P5) backed the plan.

The P3 also stayed firmly on the sidelines as the US-backed Bahrain government cracked down on the uprising.[2]

More strikingly, the US and its allies decided against a direct intervention in Syria, even as Bashar al-Assad used increasingly brutal violence against civilian targets. Although President Barack Obama declared in August 2011 that Assad must step down, the Western powers came to the aid of the opposition only through proxy and after a significant delay. The Central Intelligence Agency provided funds to rebel groups in late 2011, well after the beginning of the war. France and the UK backed the rebels from 2012 onward and launched airstrikes in 2014. On the other side of the ledger, the Russian government supplied Damascus with armored vehicles, electronic warfare systems, radars, and surveillance equipment. In a precedent-setting move, Russian president Vladimir Putin embarked on a *direct* progovernment intervention in 2015 with the stated goal of "stabilizing the legitimate power in Syria."[3] This made Syria arguably the first revolutionary conflict after the Cold War featuring *symmetrical great power interventions* by the US and Russia. As the Syrian regime began to crumble, Russia staged a five-month air campaign in direct support of its Middle Eastern client – preventing the regime's imminent collapse and shoring up control over territories from Latakia to Damascus (Landay & Strobel, 2015). Given government repression of uprisings elsewhere in the region, observers could be forgiven for asking why the Western powers staged a direct intervention in Libya but not in Bahrain, Yemen, or Syria. From the perspective of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, this behavior is bizarre.

Our book develops a *hierarchical intervention theory* to explain these and other great power choices vis-à-vis revolutionary civil wars, which are defined as armed struggles between the state government and opposition fighters over the state's form of government (i.e., its regime type).[4] Wars that are not waged to change the form of government, but

[2] The P3 later sanctioned Saudi Arabia's military support for the government in its fight against the Shia-led insurgency.

[3] "Putin defines the main task in Syria" ("Путин назвал основную задачу российских военных в Сирии," 2015). Russia was reportedly sending military personnel (formally called advisors) to control the anti-aircraft defense system.

[4] Numerous terms have been used to refer to armed struggles over the form of government, including "revolutionary wars" and "reform insurgencies." See Clapham (1998) for more on reform insurgencies, in which rebels mount a challenge against a state government they view as corrupt or repressive.

only its leadership, are not considered revolutionary conflicts.[5] In *revolutionary* conflicts, the goal of the opposition is not merely overthrowing the ruling elites, but changing the future shape of political, economic, and state institutions.[6] For this reason, we also call them *regime conflicts*. This book will show that great powers intervene in such struggles to preserve, and sometimes expand, their security hierarchies – which consist of great powers and their allies at the top and their clients nested below them.

We define great power intervention as external military support (including intelligence support, military aid and training, airstrikes, and/or the use of ground troops) to the government or the opposition by one of the five permanent members of the UNSC.[7] When a regime conflict breaks out anywhere in the world, the foremost consideration for a great power is where the conflict country sits relative to that power in the global security architecture. If the great power has significant security ties with the conflict state, then we call this a patron–client relationship. This leads to the most common form of intervention – *client* defense. When a conflict country is situated within a *rival* power's security hierarchy, the rival power is similarly called upon to defend its client government. Deterrence most often prevails among rival powers, which is why so many great power interventions are one-sided affairs. Finally, there are so-called rogues, which pursue revisionist foreign policies and/or violate international law. Although great powers usually do not intervene against such governments, they are more likely to support the opposition when they do.

Drawing on foreign policy analysis (FPA), sociological role theory, and frame analysis, this book argues that the *status* of the conflict country informs the intervention *roles* and *action scripts* that great

[5] The universe from which these conflicts are selected is defined by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program–Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) database of intrastate armed conflicts that produce at least twenty-five battle deaths per year (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Pettersson, 2020, 1; Pettersson & Öberg, 2020). To qualify as a revolutionary armed conflict, armed challengers need only *attempt* to replace the regime with another; they do not need to succeed.

[6] The transitology and democratization literatures describe the stakes of regime conflicts very well (Huntington, 1991; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Linz & Stepan, 1996; O'Donnell et al., 1991; Przeworski, 1991; Rustow, 1970; Whitehead et al., 1986).

[7] Our definition of intervention is consistent with that of the UCDP External Support Dataset (Högbladh et al., 2011).

powers choose to enact in revolutionary civil wars. In this, we build on the famed sociologist Erving Goffman's key insight that all social enterprises are a form of performance. What leads people to act is a "frame," which he defines in *Frame Analysis* (1974) as a situation that impels and even choreographs a series of response repertoires, which are episodes or "scripts." The scripts serve to "stage" or choreograph interventions on the ground.[8]

We believe that great power interventions may be thought of as *performances* undertaken to defend or extend their status in the system. Great power statuses and defense ties make up the global security architecture, which both proscribes and prescribes intervention behavior. Great powers and their allies are expected to defend their clients, fight rivals, and punish rogues. In practice, great powers intervene when prior defense ties combine with disruptive *conflict events* that activate one of four *master intervention frames*. Master frames are standardized stories that leaders of great powers tell about why and how they intervene with force. They are associated with action scripts in which great powers and their allies enact specific military roles that shape combat operations in the war theater. There is often internal contestation within great powers over how to frame such wars. Eventually, however, one frame becomes the dominant – what Goffman calls the "primary" – frame. This guides great powers in ego- and alter-casting other players into characters that perform the intervention. In short, intervention frames inform great power missions to defend their clients, deter their rivals, and punish so-called rogues. It is also how great powers retain their "greatness."

These interventions typically unfold as follows. First, prior defense pacts and arms transfers create "role expectations" for great powers to police their spheres of influence. If an intervention frame is activated, the great power ego-casts itself into a rescuer role and others into adversary roles. Allies, which have defense agreements with the great power, may

[8] Carson (2018a) also utilizes Goffman's dramaturgical theory. In his theory, "backstage" is used to refer to covert operations rather than behind-the-scenes decision-making. By contrast, Klosek (2020a) employs the backstage and frontstage concepts to refer to the background military ties and the interventions states undertake as a consequence. Our use of these concepts is closer to Klosek's, but we integrate Goffman's Frame Analysis with his dramaturgical theory to develop a structural yet processual, and hence holistic, theory of great power interventions in civil wars.

play auxiliary roles in the intervention. Rival powers and their allies might then join the battle on the other side of the conflict. The choice to start, change, or end an intervention, however, requires a dynamic conflict event. For example, the onset of violence in a foreign country is a conflict event that triggers a search for an appropriate primary frame on the great power's intervention *backstage* – where discussions take place within the foreign policy decisional unit. During these negotiations, key decision-makers "drop their acts" to plan the intervention out of view of the public. When a new primary frame is selected, the great power adapts its role performance to the frame – using the associated action script to altercast allies and clients onto the *frontstage* or war "theater."[9]

In the months and years that follow, the intervention performance may change or end when the frame no longer resonates with the audience or performers. This usually occurs in one of two ways. First, exogenous shocks or conflict events outside the frame can signal to policymakers that the prevailing frame is no longer meaningful and must be retooled or abandoned.[10] These events motivate a new search within the foreign policy executive over how to reframe the conflict on the backstage, sometimes in cooperation with their allies and clients. The new primary frame is then adopted and performed on the frontstage. Reframing continues from the onset until the termination of a conflict. Second, the conflict participants themselves may "break" the frame when they fail to perform their roles successfully. They may also engage in malingering or foot-dragging, which Goffman calls *downkeying*. The whole *frame-breaking* process can lead to a sudden rupture in the intervention itself, provoking a search for a new primary frame to end the intervention.

Our theory helps us understand how and why international status motivates great powers to commit blood and treasure to wars in distant lands. It also sheds light on why great powers shift their intervention policies over time without achieving their stated objectives. The theory is evaluated using quantitative and qualitative analysis of great power side-taking in revolutionary civil wars.[11]

[9] In this book, "altercasting" refers to the process of projecting an identity on others in order to direct, motivate, and coordinate complex interventions.

[10] Such events can produce "adverse feedback" on intervention policies, activating policy change in foreign capitals (Karlén, 2022).

[11] Hans Morgenthau observed that, contra realist doctrine, great powers routinely intervened for ideological reasons during the Cold War (1967, but see page 428ff). For an application to secessionist conflicts, see Heraclides (1991).

Taken as a whole, our book makes five core claims:

1 All else equal, great powers are *not* more likely to intervene in the presence of significant human rights abuses, even after the Cold War.[12]
2 Great powers intervene mostly on behalf of client states. Creating clients through arms transfer enables the great power patron to influence the client state without entrapping itself in a defense obligation it does not want to fulfill.
3 Great power interventions are not driven principally by prospective access to the country's oil resources or by the characteristics of its regime.
4 Rival powers generally respect each other's security hierarchies; hence, most great power interventions are one-sided affairs.
5 Great powers draw selectively on master frames to justify their interventions. These frames may later collapse due to "frame-breaking" acts by participants or nonparticipants in the conflict.

Our theory builds directly on realist theories of great power intervention.[13] There is a much larger body of work on military interventions, but we are particularly interested in great power military interventions in revolutionary civil wars.[14] We know quite a few things about *specific* great powers, especially the US and the UK, but there is less scholarly work on Soviet/Russian and Chinese interventions.[15]

[12] The R2P doctrine was adopted by the UN as part of the UN World Summit Outcome Document in 2005. Among other things, R2P established the imperative to intervene – through force if necessary – to protect civilians whom the state government cannot or will not protect from harm. For more on this doctrine, its origins, and uses, see Bellamy (2008, 2015a, 2015b) and Evans (2008). Others have argued that R2P can be seen as a legal instrument used to legitimize "humanitarian interventions," understood as military action against governments engaged in humanitarian abuses (Welsh, 2004; see also Stedman, 2007).

[13] For example, Danilovic et al. (2020) demonstrate that great powers mostly intervene in areas of major geopolitical interest; Huth (1998) shows that major powers intervene in international crises according to realpolitik logic in combination with domestic political considerations.

[14] See Regan (1998, 2000). Although we focus narrowly on military interventions in ongoing civil wars, we acknowledge that there is theoretical overlap with the literature on why states use military force in general.

[15] On Russian foreign policy decision-making, see Allison (2013c); Bennett (1999a); Kuzio (2022); Mankoff (2009); McFaul (2020); Reshetnikov (2024); and Shevtsova (2010). On Chinese foreign policy, see Huang (2023); Lanteigne (2019); Li (2013); Robinson and Shambaugh (1995); Van Ness (1973); Zhao (1996, 2013).

Creating a general theory and executing a rigorous analysis of that theory is fraught with challenges. While we are aware of the hurdles we face, we have assumed this risk, and our readers must judge the result.

Intervention Stagecraft in a Nutshell

This book focuses on revolutionary civil wars because the stakes are so enormous. Organized violence always comes with a whiff of revolution, particularly in weak states. For this reason, Fearon and Laitin (2007, 1) observed that civil wars "were almost always wars of 'regime change.'" Revolutionary conflicts feature governments fighting for survival against rebels seeking to overthrow them. This brings tremendous opportunities to challengers, as well as vulnerabilities to incumbents. The stakes of such conflicts are difficult to overestimate – revolutionary conflicts impact entire state populations, often for generations; victory by the opposition might lead to an entirely different political and economic system, status reversal of ethnic groups, and/or a new set of alliance patterns. By contrast, territorial conflicts rarely result in the regime's demise. They are usually waged over remote, mountainous, or otherwise peripheral regions (consider, for example, the long secessionist conflicts in Myanmar, Turkey, Sudan, and Georgia). They are also less likely to impact the entire state. Sri Lanka's thirty-year secessionist war, and the thirty-year Northern Ireland "Troubles," show how territorial conflicts can be effectively "walled off" from the rest of the state in ways that regime conflicts – which target the central state government – cannot. Finally, since great powers are significantly more likely to intervene in revolutionary conflicts than territorial conflicts (see Chapter 3), these interventions are likely to have a critical impact on international relations.

Revolutionary civil wars tend to be more costly than other types of civil wars. They are on average twice as long and significantly more deadly than territorial conflicts (see Figure 7.1). Twentieth-century regime conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Angola, and Afghanistan and twenty-first-century regime conflicts in Libya, Afghanistan, and Syria destroyed entire economies and country-wide infrastructures. They have also created significant negative externalities for their neighborhoods – including weapons trafficking, refugee flows, drug smuggling, and cross-border movement of fighters.

Great powers have long acted as kingmakers in such conflicts. Nonetheless, we have few general theories about when and how the

world's leading powers intervene in revolutionary civil wars in the way they do. We acknowledge that great power interventions are powerfully shaped by what Kenneth Waltz called the condition of anarchy, meaning that the lack of formal global governance creates a system of self-help in which states are forced to ensure their own survival.[16] Nevertheless, we join hierarchical international relations scholars in observing that the international system is in many ways more *hierarchical* than it is anarchical.[17] Lake (2017) identifies three types of international hierarchies: "deep hierarchies," which are the invisible and unspoken racial hierarchies (Hobson, 2014; Hobson & Sharman, 2005), or gender hierarchies within and between states (Sjoberg, 2012, 2017); "status hierarchies," in which states occupy superordinate versus subordinate roles in the system such as "great," "middle," and "small" powers (Pu & Schweller, 2014; Volgy et al., 2014; Ward, 2017); and "authority hierarchies," in which some states and actors enjoy formalized dominance or the "right to rule" over other actors in international regimes and organizations (Lake, 2014).

Security hierarchies combine elements of authority hierarchies – in which great powers assume responsibility for global peace – and status hierarchies between great and small powers – in which client states give up some sovereignty in return for protection from their patrons. These security relationships create significant costs for patron powers, which are periodically called upon to defend members of their hierarchies from security threats. Asymmetrical security relationships strongly condition great power responses to revolutionary civil wars around the world because they are compelled to demonstrate to themselves

[16] While Waltz mostly focused on horizontal rivalries, arguing states must fend for their own survival by forming alliances to check rising powers (Waltz, 1979, chap. 3), recent international relations scholarship has focused on less-traditional military interventions, such as hybrid warfare and covert operations (Carson, 2016, 2018b). Others have studied the delegation of war by external governments to local proxies (Karlén et al., 2021; Popovic, 2017; Salehyan, 2010). We define side-taking broadly as both direct and indirect forms of military intervention aimed to tip the balance of forces in battle.

[17] Hierarchical international relations scholarship has challenged the anarchy assumption underlying structural realism. In doing so, they draw attention to the overlooked *vertical relations* between dominant and subjugated states in the international system. They argue that anarchy theorists overestimate the agency of weak states in the system because they are boxed into involuntary relations of dominance. For more on hierarchical international relations, see Cooley (2005); Lake (1996, 2009a); and Weber (2000).

and to others that they are responsible security providers.[18] Great powers preside over security hierarchies. Protection – in the form of deterrence and insurance – is the main benefit they offer to members of their hierarchies. In return, clients help to advance their patrons' foreign policy goals (Finnemore, 2009). By fulfilling patron role expectations, they inspire confidence from their allies and clients while deterring rivals and rogues from challenging the status quo.

In this book, we draw on the tools of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and sociological role theory and frame analysis to craft a predictive and processual framework of great power interventions in revolutionary civil wars (see Figure 1.1).[19] Walter Carlnaes' (1987) general FPA schema tells us that foreign policy action begins with structural factors on the international level, which leads to dispositional factors at the state level and, finally, intentional factors at the leadership level.[20] Carlnaes' schema is premised on the neoclassical realist notion that leadership choices are always undertaken in a structural setting that introduces opportunities as well as constraints.

In our role theoretic framework, great power interventions are *performances* undertaken to defend or extend their status as great powers in the international system. These statuses are defined by interlinked global *security hierarchies*, which both proscribe and prescribe great power action. Security hierarchies consist of security exchange relations

[18] Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo (2015) demonstrate that states care about cultivating a reputation for reliability and resolution in international affairs. Great powers should be even more incentivized to protect their reputations – to their allies, clients, and adversaries alike.

[19] Neoclassical realism offers accounts of foreign policy that begins first with international constraints, norms, and opportunities and then builds on these spare accounts by adding additional variables at the domestic level such as regime type, political institutions, and leadership factors (see especially Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998; Wohlforth, 1993). These multilevel models incorporate systemic, state, and individual-level variables of constraints and incentives to account for how states in a similar geopolitical position might engage in differential foreign policy decision-making (Gvalia et al., 2013; Owen, 1994; Rose, 1998; Skidmore, 1997; Wohlforth, 2012a, 2012b). For other accounts integrating individual, government, and systemic factors, see Allison (1969); Clark (1989); and Garrison (2003).

[20] Our top-down model follows the logic of neoclassical realism, which holds that we must begin our foreign policy analysis with the constraints and opportunities introduced by the structure of the system, which for our purposes are security hierarchies. For a similar visual depiction moving from left to right, see Beach and Pedersen (2019a, 65).

between great powers, their allies/junior partners (second tier), and their clients (third tier) that delineate the boundaries of each power's hierarchy and inscribe the boundaries of their "sphere of influence." The "great power" moniker indicates a state that enjoys a higher status than other states in the international system and implies generalized *role expectations* that govern their intervention choices. The shape of these hierarchies evolves due to changes in great power capabilities, determining the lateral balances of power as well as the vertical commitments between great powers, their allies, and their client states.

Following Goffman's (1956) theater metaphor, we argue that security hierarchies "set the stage" for great power side-taking. On the hidden "backstage," decisions are made based on the exchange relationship between the great power and the conflict country. On the "frontstage," these decisions are then "sold" to domestic or international audiences who "watch" and "review" the intervention. On the frontstage, a *primary frame* is used to interpret, justify, and guide great power interventions.[21] According to Goffman's Frame Analysis, a primary frame is needed to make sense of a problem and devise a solution to it. Goffman defines a primary frame as an interpretive schema that "allows its users to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of occurrences defined in its terms" (Goffman 1974a). Primary frames tell us whether and how a conflict is meaningful. It makes certain aspects of the information environment more salient and others less so; it offers a schema for thinking about the conflict and whether or not to participate in it. Primary frames also provide the grammar that foreign policy executives use to gain acceptance for their interventionist policies both domestically and abroad.[22]

These frames contain all the information necessary to motivate and orchestrate interventions, including how the problem should be framed and what solution (intervention choice) is required. They contain *roles*

[21] Numerous scholars have drawn attention to the role of narratives in justifying military intervention, most notably Krebs (2015a). Although narratives appear to perform the same function as frames, the latter emphasizes the importance of fitting events into an interpretive system that not only provides meaning to these events but also highlights *problems* and suggests *solutions* that motivate *action*. In other words, frames are explicitly problem-solving heuristics.

[22] Similar to frames, international relations scholars have long argued that narratives or stories are vital to justifying state intervention; see Doty (1993); Goddard and Krebs (2015); Igarashi (2012); Krebs (2015a, 2015b); Malmvig (2006); and Paris (2002).

for both the rescuers and the rescued. Depending on the frame, great powers are *ego*cast into intervenor roles, whereas the embattled regimes are *alter*cast as clients (who must be assisted), rivals (who must be contained), or rogues (who must be punished or removed). On the international "stage," these roles produce *role expectations* for great powers at both the domestic and international levels to enact pregiven *action scripts* that they must fulfill if they want to retain their prevailing global status.

A "successful" intervention frame both guides and naturalizes great power responses to regime conflicts. It does so by diagnosing the causes of the conflict, offering solutions to it, and providing great powers and their allies with roles to play in the performance, as well as action scripts that guide intervention policies going forward. The primary frame prescribes solutions to regime conflicts on an ongoing basis (e.g., offering military aid, introducing sanctions, or launching an air war) that follow from the diagnosis of the conflict. The success of each frame hinges on the perceived desirability and inevitability of a particular response to the conflict.

Rival factions on the intervention backstage may propose different frames that they use to vie for control of the state's intervention policies.[23] In the end, however, there must be a working consensus around a single primary frame to ensure a coherent performance. The primary frame tells us *why* great power interests are tied up with the outcome of a foreign war. To do so, it must draw a straight line from the national interests of the great power to the welfare of one side of the conflict (either the government or the opposition). If this line cannot be drawn convincingly, it can undermine support for the intervention.

Although scholars disagree about the most important causes of military interventions, there is a general consensus that military interventions are planned behind the scenes by foreign-policy decision-makers (Barkin, 2010). Hence, our analysis never strays far from what we call the foreign policy decisional unit and elite rhetoric (see especially Saunders, 2011a). By examining these rhetorical struggles in our case studies, we show how primary frames are selected and used to justify intervention choices. The selected intervention frame may be

[23] See Paris (2002) and (Malmvig, 2006) on the intergovernmental struggle between the US Clinton administration and Congressional leaders over the appropriate response to the 1999 Kosovo War.

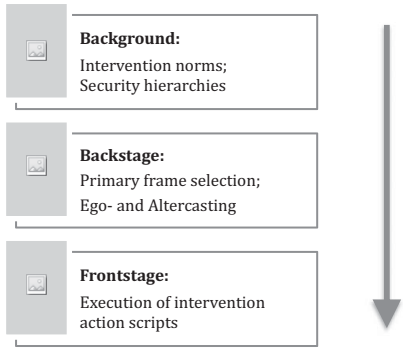

Figure 1.1 The stagecraft of great power interventions.

challenged later by new facts on the ground as well as by changing perceptions of great power interests (Diez, 2013; Regan, 1998a; Seiglie, 1999). For each great power, the imperative to solve the world's security problems means that each foreign war must be interpreted through the prevailing intervention norms and domestic- and elite-level cognitive frames. It is important to bear in mind that this process occurs on an ongoing basis, which can yield unexpected ruptures in intervention policies.

Alternative Theories of Great Power Intervention

While we focus on developing and testing our hierarchical intervention theory both quantitatively and qualitatively, we also consider five prominent alternative accounts – natural resource competition, ideological ties, great power rivalry, humanitarian concerns, and leadership trait analysis. Where appropriate, we also show how these theories might be made compatible with our model.

Resource Competition

Classic *realpolitik* accounts of intervention hold that states are more likely to intervene in countries with valuable land-based resources (oil, gas, diamonds, and other valuable minerals) than in places that lack resources (Bannon & Collier, 2003; Bove et al., 2016; Collier & Hoeffler, 2005; Klare, 2002; Lujala, 2010; Lujala et al., 2005; Ross,

2004a, 2004b). Great powers should be no exception in this regard. The logic is that military interventions are driven primarily by "greed" or "opportunism" since valuable extractable resources offer rents or "future booty" to governments that gain control over valuable territory by the war's end. Particularly in weaker states, the temptation to use force to capture resources is high when great powers can prop up (or install) a friendly government that can provide privileged access to oil, gas, and mineral concessions, or strategically located seaports or waterways.

Resource theories predict more interventions in states that contain more valuable resources (e.g., oil, gas, and diamonds). Due to the high prospective return and reward for controlling resource-rich territory, revolutionary civil wars in such places should be more likely to attract great power intervention (Bove et al., 2016; Kehl, 2010; Klare, 2007; Leech, 2008). Offensive realists contend that states are constantly seeking to expand their power and can therefore be expected to take sides in revolutionary civil wars when doing so enhances their power. Snyder's (1991) theory of "imperial log-rolling," for example, predicts that great powers are likely to intervene offensively in internal conflicts to expand their imperial reach.[24] What this implies is that great powers engage in competitive resource grabs when war comes to resource-rich countries. A classic example of this was Congo in the early 1960s, when the world's superpowers sought to install a friendly regime that would guarantee access to Congo's plentiful diamond and other mineral resources (Mazov, 2007; Weissman, 1979).

While this logic helps shed light on why *some* revolutionary civil wars attract great powers while others do not, it leaves unexplained the many lengthy and costly great power engagements in countries that have few or very undeveloped resources. This includes prominent interventions such as the US's offensive intervention in Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Soviet Union's defensive intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the US's interventions in Afghanistan in the 2000s and 2010s.

[24] "It cannot be denied," said Hans Morgenthau (1948, 29), "that throughout historic time, regardless of social, economic and political conditions, states have met each other in contests for power."

Although a proper test of resource competition includes *all* types of resources, we have chosen to focus on oil to test the thesis that great powers are mostly interested in intervening in wars where they can gain access to valuable oil resources. Oil has long been a vital political, economic, and strategic asset for great powers. Our quantitative tests show, however, that oil production poorly predicts great power intervention in revolutionary civil wars.[25]

Great Power Rivalry

Rival states have been found responsible for a "disproportionate share of total conflict" around the world (Colaresi & Thompson, 2002, 284; see also Colaresi et al., 2008). This is especially true of *great power* rivals. Diplomats and scholars widely perceive great power interventions as competitive power plays on the world's "grand chessboard" (e.g., Brzezinski 1997). In terms of interventions in civil wars, rivalry theories expect great powers to act as "power balancers" – checking the rise of hostile challengers through competitive alliance-building, offshore balancing, and military interventions. The chess-match metaphor was widely invoked by historians of nineteenth-century Europe, who argued that Russia and Great Britain were engaged in a "Great Game" over control of Central Asia. The metaphor was repurposed in the 1950s to shed light on the dynamics of Cold War "proxy wars" between the US and Soviet Union in countries as far-flung as Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Thailand, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. The past decade has seen a redux, with the escalating US–China diplomatic dispute over Taiwanese sovereignty, as well as US–Russia symmetric interventions in Syria and Ukraine portrayed as a chess-match between democratic and authoritarian powers (Barnard & Shoumali, 2015; Brands & Cooper, 2020; Cooley, 2012; Pengelly, 2015).

The rivalry thesis implies that great powers take sides in wars to deny their competitors access to a country or region. According to defensive realists, great powers hold an expansive definition of national interests, which includes preventing challengers from gaining

[25] That said, we do not exclude the possibility that the *prospect* of oil or other mineral extraction might influence great power proclivities to intervene in an ongoing revolutionary civil war.

influence in geostrategically important regions. During the Cold War, such theories were used to account for "proxy interventions" (e.g., Dunér, 1981), through which one great power attempted to counter or "balance" a rival power's bid for regional or global hegemony. In this view, great powers intervene not only to defend their spheres of influence but also to counter challengers seeking to achieve influence in their sphere (Gaddis, 2005; Kennan, 1989). During the early Cold War, rival US–China interventions took place in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and rival US–Soviet interventions in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Angola, and Afghanistan. After the Cold War, US–Russia rivalry led to competing interventions in Syria and Ukraine.

Although great powers operate with a wider margin of error than weak states, even superpowers must be continually alert to the possibility that challengers could gain an advantage by intervening in a weak state (Kanet, 2006; Waltz, 1979, chap. 9, 2000). Security dilemmas emerge when one power perceives a rival power's intervention in a third state as a hostile act, provoking the first power to react with its own intervention (Jervis, 1978; Kydd, 1997). In this way, even status-quo powers can unintentionally escalate proxy wars in far-flung parts of the world.[26]

The problem with the rivalry thesis is that it *significantly overpredicts* great power interventions.[27] As we show in Chapter 3, symmetrical interventions account for only a small minority of great power interventions. Even during periods of significant rivalry, most great power interventions went uncontested by a rival. Second, contra Snyder's expectations, we find that contemporary great powers are actually *less* likely to intervene in a conflict if a rival power has intervened on the other side.

That said, rivalry clearly factors into the calculus of great power intervention decisions and is therefore part of our model. What we show, however, is that *horizontal rivalries* are less consequential than *vertical commitments* in driving great power intervention choices.

[26] A narrower defensive realist prediction is that great powers intervene in regime conflicts when war threatens to spill over its borders to foment wider unrest, particularly as refugees, weapons, and fighters from the war-torn state threaten the great power's allies and interests in the region (Dowty & Loescher, 1996).

[27] Nonetheless, great power rivalry may still be conducted indirectly through allies or client states.

Ideological Ties

Some scholars have argued for an *Innenpolitik* approach to great power politics, expecting great power side-taking in civil wars to be largely "home-grown," or determined by the internal politics of the would-be intervenor. If we follow the "birds of a feather" school of thought, great powers should intervene to prop up their ideological allies when they are threatened by violent removal. What this means is that autocratic powers should intervene on behalf of embattled autocratic regimes, while liberal powers should support democratic regimes. Ideological rivalry was believed to drive interventions during the Cold War, just as democracy promotion was thought to drive Western (particularly British and American) interventions after the Cold War (Meernik, 1996).

The most elaborated ideological mechanism for intervention is Democratic Peace Theory (DPT). Democratic peace theorists expect democracies to produce peace, but only with one another (Huth, 1998a; Owen, 1994). Outside the liberal "zone of peace," democratic powers may try to export their system of governance at gunpoint. According to Downes and Monten (2013, 91), "since the end of the Cold War, the United States and its democratic allies intervened militarily – at least in part to empower democratic rule – in Panama (1989), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), Yugoslavia/Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), and Libya (2011)." What is more, ideological motivation is expected to cut both ways (Allison, 2013a; Bennett, 1999; Pearson, 1974). Western democracy promotion has been countered, especially by Russia, with autocracy promotion (Aidt & Eterovic, 2011; Khamzayeva, 2012).

We show, however, that prior regime similarities are a poor predictor of great power side-taking in revolutionary civil wars – particularly since the end of the Cold War. A cursory review of the history of interventions makes this clear: The US sided with numerous autocratic regimes like El Salvador and with Islamist nonstate armed groups, such as the Mujahideen in Afghanistan and the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (formerly the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group – LIFG), which included rebels with ties to al-Qaeda. Great powers have also joined forces *across* ideological lines. China joined France and the US in backing the Sudanese government during the early 1990s; China joined France in support of the Niger regime battling Tuareg insurgents in the

1990s. The UK and France worked with the Soviets in backing the Marxist government in Mozambique against anticommunist forces. Strikingly, the Communist governments of China and the Soviet Union intervened on *opposite* sides of a brutal regime conflict in Cambodia and also (briefly) in the Angolan civil war. In fact, since the 1970s, China mostly intervened in regime conflicts on the *same* side as the US.

Straightforward regime promotion arguments cannot account for these coalitional patterns. Regime similarities also cannot explain arms transfers from great powers to conflict countries, except in the case of the Soviets and their client states during the Cold War.[28] Ideological regime alignment may help protect against client defection within security hierarchies, but it rarely *motivates* arms sales, much less actual military interventions.

Humanitarian Concerns

In the 1990s, international relations theorists, legal scholars, and historians began to question materialist theories of war, noting that norms, ideas, and culture are increasingly pushing big states to intervene in wars to protect ordinary people from rapacious governments (Finnemore, 2004; Weiss, 2005; Welsh, 2013).[29] While minority rights and international humanitarian law took a backseat to territorial sovereignty during the Cold War, the post–Cold War period bore witness to a renewed normative interest in so-called humanitarian interventions. World leaders vowed to avoid a repeat of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. These lessons laid the foundation for efforts to ensure that mass killings would never again be ignored by the international community.

[28] However, allies *do* tend to adhere to the same regime ideologies as their great power partners.

[29] Efforts to protect vulnerable national minorities date back at least to the 1815 Congress of Vienna. At the 1863 Congress of Berlin, Western powers inserted external guarantees of minority protections into bilateral treaties with new states in the Balkans, giving them the right to intervene in case their rights were violated (Bass, 2009; Rodogno, 2012; Simms & Trim, 2011). The architects of the League of Nations – the first institutionalized global security regime – set up the League Minorities Protection System after the First World War to monitor and enforce minority rights in new and enlarged states in order to keep the peace (Jenne, 2015).

Due to the concerted efforts of activists, scholars, and two UN general secretaries, the R2P doctrine was adopted by the UN General Assembly at the 2005 World Summit.[30] The doctrine holds that "sovereign states are responsible for the protection of their populations from mass atrocities and that they are accountable not only to their own people but also to international society for the performance of this duty" (Glanville, 2013, 171). The R2P doctrine created an imperative for the international community to intervene, using military force if necessary, marking "a dramatic departure from the Cold War understanding of sovereignty" (Glanville, 2013, 171). While it does not establish a *duty* to act, much less intervene militarily, it does imply that in today's world, humanitarian justifications for intervention should find more receptive audiences (Payandeh, 2010, 482–483).[31] If this is true, we should be more likely to see offensive interventions against highly abusive governments, all else equal. After all, Western governments have launched military campaigns to prevent or halt mass violence against innocent civilians in East Timor, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia, and Kosovo (Evans & Sahnoun, 2002; Finnemore, 1996; Hoffmann, 1995; Knudsen, 1996; Stahn, 2017; Weiss, 2005).

Due to strengthening humanitarian norms since the end of the Cold War, great powers should be more willing to intervene against human rights violators today.[32] In fact, Finnemore (2004) contends that humanitarian norms have had a far greater conditioning effect on great powers in the post–Cold War period, due to a growing international

[30] The name of R2P was intended to make the doctrine more appealing to the international community by creating a positive responsibility to protect civilians rather than a negative right to intervene (Bellamy, 2011; Evans, 2008). The three pillars of R2P include (1) the responsibility of states to protect their citizens against atrocities, (2) the responsibility to assist other states in undertaking this protection, and (3) the responsibility to engage in collective action in a timely manner if any state is deemed to be "manifestly failing" its responsibility to protect its citizens (Welsh, 2019, 53). It is the third pillar that justifies outside military intervention.

[31] See Falk (1995, 493, 497); Finnemore (1996, 1); and Roberts (1993, 32ff).

[32] Finnemore (1996) and Wheeler (2000) offer the best articulation of this argument. But note Recchia and Welsh (2013) for the philosophical antecedents of contemporary humanitarian norms, and Rodogno (2012) for an empirical account of great power interventions during the (long) nineteenth century.

commitment to protect innocent civilians whose government cannot or will not fulfill its responsibilities to its citizens. Other international relations scholars expect humanitarian concerns to influence liberal powers more than illiberal powers because violations of individual rights enjoy greater resonance in democratic societies and democratically elected leaders are more accountable to their publics.

Nonetheless, existing studies are inconclusive about the extent to which humanitarian concerns motivate liberal power interventions. Choi and James (2016) find that the US has been more likely to intervene militarily to protect human rights than to further its security interests, while Butler (2003) presents more mixed results in his analysis of US interventions during the Cold War. Even if we assume that the norm is only influential for liberal powers, and only at the end of the Cold War, we come up short in understanding why humanitarian interventions were waged to save civilians in some cases but not others. For instance, humanitarianism was used to justify interventions in Iraq and Libya, but not in Sudan, Congo, or Myanmar, where civilian atrocities were every bit as severe.

Our quantitative analysis in Chapter 3 shows that humanitarian violations were *not* more likely to attract great power engagement, all else equal. Furthermore, liberal powers were no more likely to intervene to end civilian repression than illiberal powers. Humanitarian concerns *do*, however, help leaders frame or "sell" offensive interventions to their publics, as we will see in our case studies of liberal interventions in Afghanistan and Libya as well as the Russian intervention in Ukraine.

Leadership Trait Analysis

Leadership theories broadly hold that the cognitive processes and personalities of leaders matter for intervention choices. Some also argue that state leaders "learn lessons" from past interventions. Bennett (1999b) suggests that the Soviets, drawing lessons from US failures in Vietnam, concluded that their own intervention in Afghanistan was lost, leading them to withdraw their support for the regime and end the war. In another lesson-drawing theory, Karlén (2022) argued that state interventions change course when they are perceived as failing. Analyzing the US intervention in Nicaragua in the

1980s, he showed that US leaders changed their strategy only once they perceived that they were losing.[33]

These theories also help to explain the withdrawal of armed forces. Taliaferro (2004) used prospect theory to develop a "loss aversion" explanation for why the US, Soviet Union, Germany, and Japan maintained lengthy military engagements in peripheral countries, at considerable loss of life and treasure. He argued that leaders remain involved in conflicts due to the "sunk cost" fallacy. Unlike Karlén's (2017) theory about learning from perceived mistakes, Taliaferro argued that great powers sustain their costly interventions because they are unwilling to assimilate their losses. Still others have argued that the risk tolerance of the foreign policy executive may explain the propensity both to intervene and to escalate (Haney, 2005).[34]

State leaders may also intervene in foreign civil conflicts when they are politically endangered at home (Kornprobst, 2019, 13). Unpopular officeholders may "gamble for resurrection" by entering into foreign wars to provoke a "rally around the flag" effect, inoculating the leader (at least temporarily) from domestic opposition (Goemans, 2000). Russian president Vladimir Putin's interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014, 2022), and Syria (2015) might be understood as attempts to maintain regime security during his long tenure.[35] A similar logic may help explain Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's reckless military foray into the Kurdish areas of northern Syria.[36]

Drilling down into the psychology of leaders, Yarhi-Milo (2014) shows that different members of the Carter administrations had differing perceptions of the Soviet threat following the 1979 invasion

[33] Leadership theories of intervention are overwhelmingly based on single cases studied over time.

[34] Saunders also offers an exemplary leadership-centric approach in her work, which focuses more on the "mode/form" of intervention rather than on why great powers intervene. See Saunders (2009, 2011b).

[35] According to Statistica, Putin enjoyed a boost in popularity after the invasion of Ukraine (www.statista.com/statistics/896181/putin-approval-rating-russia/#:~:text=In%20April%202024%2C%20over%20eight,partial%20mobilization%20in%20the%20country). Putin's concern for survival might have been at least partly responsible for the Russian interventions in Crimea (McFaul et al., 2014, 169–171) and Georgia (Shevtsova, 2010, chap. 19).

[36] https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/23/erdogan-turkey-syria-strategy-kurds.

of Afghanistan because they used different sources of information to divine Soviet intentions. Paris (2002) showed that the Clinton administration made strategic use of metaphors to justify intervention in Kosovo, and Khong (1992) demonstrated that American war strategists used historical analogies to shape their understandings of each war setting, influencing the recommendations they made. Analogies, metaphors, lessons, and loss aversion clearly condition the choices of great powers about whether and how to intervene in a conflict (Flanik, 2018; Hehir, 2006). Leadership theories may also help explain features of intervention choices, particularly for understanding the shape and trajectory of lengthy interventions over time.

Leadership theories are difficult to test across a large number of cases, however, due to the significant amount of data needed to test leadership theories reliably across space and time. Hence, our case study chapters will focus mainly on leadership trait analysis because it only requires at-a-distance measures of leadership traits. Using dictionaries to test for different leadership traits – like the need for affiliation, cognitive complexity, and the need for power, as well as their belief in their control over the situation – scholars have collected and analyzed leader speeches and interview transcripts to classify them into "constraint challengers" or "constraint respecters." The expectation is that the constraint challengers are more likely to intervene militarily than constraint respecters, all other things equal. Keller (2005) analyzes 154 foreign policy crises, showing that in democratic states, leaders who respect institutional constraints are less likely to use force to resolve crises than leaders who do not respect institutional constraints. Likewise, Dyson (2007) showed that the UK prime minister Harold Wilson (a "constraint respecter") refused to join the US as an ally in the Vietnam War, whereas the UK prime minister Tony Blair (a "constraint challenger") was far more eager to join the US in the war in Iraq.

While leadership traits clearly matter, we contend that a more complete account of great power intervention requires integrating leadership decision-making with structural accounts that take security hierarchies into account. Doing so helps us understand how interventions play out at multiple levels of analysis. Table 1.1 summarizes these accounts, which we assess throughout this book.

Table 1.1 *Competing explanations for great power interventions.*

Thesis	Theoretical predictions	Empirical tests
Resource competition	Great powers take sides in regime conflicts in a calculated effort to secure access to valuable resources such as oil resources, gas pipelines, or mining concessions.	Quantitative tests (Chapter 3)
Great power rivalry	Great powers take sides in regime conflicts in response to rival power interventions or revisionist foreign policy.	Quantitative tests (Chapter 3)
Ideological ties	Great powers take sides in regime conflicts to support regimes that most closely resemble their own.	Quantitative tests (Chapter 3)
Humanitarian concerns	Great powers (particularly liberal powers) intervene offensively in regime conflicts against repressive governments.	Quantitative tests (Chapter 3)
Leadership trait theories	Great powers intervene offensively in regime conflicts (or not) largely due to leadership traits that make them more (or less) likely to challenge constraints.	Qualitative tests (Chapters 4–6)
Hierarchical intervention theory	Great powers follow the "backstage" logic of preexisting security orders in choosing their intervention policies; they alter their intervention policy on the "frontstage" as events select for new dominant war narratives.	Quantitative and qualitative tests (Chapters 3–6)

Overview of the Book

We develop and test our framework in the coming chapters. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical core of the book – our hierarchical intervention theory. Our mixed-methods approach gives readers both a thousand-foot perspective great power interventions, as well as a close-up view of how great power side-taking is negotiated on the backstage and performed on the frontstage. This gives us a sense not only of big picture drivers of interventions, but also of how intervention decisions are

made in real time, which helps make sense of granular shifts in intervention policies over time.

Chapter 3 tests our core propositions using a joint intervention and side-taking model. Using an original dataset of all actual and potential interventions in regime conflicts from 1975 to 2015, we estimate a flexible copula model to assess explanations of great power intervention and side-taking. Our analysis reveals that prior security ties (as captured by arms sales) profoundly shape great power interventions and significantly increase the chance that the great power will intervene on the side of the government. We also show that humanitarian abuses by the conflict state, ideological similarity between the great power and conflict state, and oil resources within the conflict state are much less influential. The client logic clearly dominates intervention behavior, as great powers seek to maintain and sometimes expand their security hierarchies.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 feature longitudinal-comparative analyses of regime conflicts in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria to show how prior defensive ties and role contestation have conditioned great power side-taking choices across both time and space. Combining pattern-matching with process-tracing, these chapters account for shifts in great power interventions in Afghanistan from the Cold War through the post-9/11 period.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate great power interventions in Afghanistan as our primary longitudinal case study. Afghanistan is not only the site of one of the longest and bloodiest regime conflicts but also a country that switched from the Soviet security hierarchy to the US security hierarchy after the Cold War. This allows us to "hold the intervention stage constant" to explore how the country's membership first in the Soviet and then the US security hierarchies produced symmetrical US–Soviet interventions in the 1980s and a liberal asymmetrical intervention in the 2000s and 2010s. In both chapters, we analyze UNSC debates since the 1980s to map great power policies toward the conflicts over time.[37] We supplemented this with P5 statements about each conflict in UNSC debates. Evidence shows that prior arms transfers (hierarchical security ties) helped to set the stage for intervention, while great powers undertook frame contestation on the backstage. Once a

[37] Research assistants with relevant language and country expertise assisted us in compiling data on rhetoric and intervention policy for each of the P5.

primary frame was selected, it shaped each power's intervention choices on the frontstage.

Chapter 6 deploys a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze two conflicts that began during the 2011 Arab Spring: Libya and Syria. These two cases were chosen for several reasons. They began at the same time and were embedded in the same geopolitical complex. They also featured similarly repressive dictators, significant humanitarian abuses, as well as popular dissatisfaction in the run-up to the Arab Spring. Finally, both Syria and Libya were seen as crucial test cases for the R2P intervention norm. Despite these similarities, the two conflicts featured very different great power responses. On the side of the opposition, there was a direct and immediate NATO intervention in Libya, but an indirect and delayed liberal power intervention in Syria. On the side of the government, Russia intervened defensively to support an anti-Western government in Syria, but did not support the anti-Western government in Libya. Using joint comparative longitudinal analysis, we show that these superficially puzzling choices make sense against the background of competing security hierarchies. Finally, Chapter 7 draws general lessons from our analysis and applies them to great power interventions in the ongoing Ukrainian war.

Conclusion

Over the next six chapters, we demonstrate that security hierarchies are at the heart of great power intervention choices. We trace the origins of these hierarchies and test their influence on great power side-taking in revolutionary civil wars. Contrary to widespread contemporary perceptions that Western powers are consistently engaged in competitive proxy wars with Russia and China around the world, we show that the overwhelming majority of P5 interventions have been defensive, following the logic of patron–client ties. Relatively few interventions have been aimed at countering a client of a rival power. Even fewer sought to punish rogue regimes. This suggests that great power engagement has been predominantly *defensive* in nature – focused on at reinforcing vertical ties in security hierarchies rather than policing horizontal rivalries. This offers us some hope that great power interventions in revolutionary civil wars are self-limiting in both time and space.

Our most important message is that great power interventions are shaped and constrained by prior security hierarchies, which are vertical and horizontal lattices made up of arms transfers, defense pacts, and rivalries. The upshot is that deterrence works with most great powers most of the time, as rival powers generally respect each other's security hierarchies. The leaders of great powers draw selectively on primary frames to justify their intervention policies. Once selected and enacted, they may be later discarded in the wake of "frame-breaking" acts. Contrary to some theories, our analysis indicates that great powers are *not* more likely to intervene when there are significant human rights abuses, even if we restrict our focus to the P3 in the post–Cold War period when R2P norms gained greater force.[38] Perhaps surprisingly, we find that great powers also routinely intervene across ideological lines when their clients are at risk and hierarchies require maintenance. These findings have crucial implications for international security and foreign policy analysis that we lay out in the concluding chapter (Chapter 7).

[38] Among other things, the R2P doctrine established the imperative to intervene – through force if necessary – to protect civilians whom the state government cannot or will not protect from harm. For more on this doctrine, its origins, and uses, see Bellamy (2008, 2015a, 2015b) and Evans (2008). Others observed that R2P can be seen as a legal instrument used to legitimize "humanitarian interventions," understood as military action against governments engaged in humanitarian abuses (Welsh, 2004; see also Stedman, 2007).