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External Threats, Capacity, and Repression:
How the Threat of War Affects Political Development
and Physical Integrity Rights

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Abstract

How do external threats affect leaders' incentives to repress? We argue that external threats both increase and decrease state repression, but through different causal pathways. Directly, external threats provide leaders political cover to use repression against political opponents. Indirectly, threats incentivize leaders to augment state capacity, which decreases the likelihood that state agents engage in repression. To test this argument, we develop a new latent measure of external threat using a Bayesian measurement model. We then use mediation analysis to examine the direct and indirect effects of external threats on repression in developing countries from 1980 to 2016. We find support that external threats can increase government repression directly, but indirectly decrease repression through stronger state capacity. Our findings have implications for how international factors connect to domestic politics to help explain states' respect for physical integrity rights. In addition, our new measure of external threat will help other scholars interested in the consequences of the international threat environment.

Keywords— external threats, state capacity, physical integrity rights, repression

The costs and consequences of interstate wars incentivize leaders to respond to external threats. For example, external threats may prompt states to industrialize, strengthen institutions, and centralize power (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Gibler, 2010). This study focuses on an alternative consequence of external threats: states' abuse of physical integrity rights. We argue that external threats *directly* increase repression because threats allow leaders to crack down on dissent and opposition. Yet external threats can *indirectly* decrease repression through increased state capacity. In sum, external threats both increase and decrease government repression, but through different causal pathways.¹

Consider the example of Ukraine. When Russia seized Crimea in 2014, Ukraine's low capacity prevented the government from mobilizing resources to fight. Ukraine's weakness also facilitated human rights abuses by state agents. Reports by the U.S. State Department, Human Rights Watch, and the UN all note that in 2013 and 2014 a number of transgressions by Ukrainian security forces were not prosecuted.² Overall, Ukraine lacked the capacity to control state-agents from committing physical integrity rights abuses.

In response to the growing Russian threat, Ukraine implemented a number of capacity building policies, such as a new war tax in 2015 and new civil service, and administrative reforms in 2016. Recent fiscal assessments by the IMF and EU note improvements in Ukraine's tax collection measures, resulting in tax revenue percentages comparable to EU member countries (Dimitrova et al., 2021). On one hand, the improvement in Ukraine's capacity increases the likelihood that the state can monitor and prosecute physical integrity rights abuses. On the other hand, the looming threat of Russia provided Ukrainian leaders the political justification to crack down on political opponents or Russia supporters. For example, pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk was imprisoned on charges of treason in 2021.

The Ukrainian example demonstrates that leaders may react to external threats by increasing capacity, which may decrease repression. External threats may also motivate leaders to use repression against political opponents. To test our argument, we first develop a new latent measure of external threats through a Bayesian measurement model. With this measure, we then use mediation analysis to examine the direct and indirect

¹We use the terms physical integrity rights and repression interchangeably in this study for stylistic purposes, though we note that these concepts do not always overlap. Repression can encompass a wide variety of behavior that raises the costs on challenging the government but do not necessarily involve physical integrity rights abuses (Davenport, 2007). In addition, not all physical integrity rights abuses are repressive (Beger and Hill Jr, 2019).

²<https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/253123.pdf>; <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/ukraine>; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/ukraine>.

effects of external threats on repression. Using data on developing countries from 1980 to 2016, we find that external threats directly increase repression. However, external threats also increase state capacity, which reduces government repression.

Our findings help us understand how external threats affect one subcategory of human rights: physical integrity rights. Following Cingranelli and Richards (1999, 407), we define physical integrity rights as “the entitlements individuals have in international law to be free from arbitrary harm and coercion by their government.” Governments violate these rights through political imprisonment, torture, disappearances, or extrajudicial killing (Cingranelli and Richards, 1999, 407). The existing human rights literature already recognizes how either external or domestic political factors explain varying repressive behavior (for example, see Cingranelli, Fajardo-Heyward and Filippov, 2014; Liou, Murdie and Peksen, 2020). Our study adds to this understanding by demonstrating how external conditions work through domestic factors to explain repressive behavior.

In addition, by focusing on external threats and capacity, we can revisit the important consequences of the bellicist theory of state-building (Tilly, 1992). Like others before, we find a positive relationship between external threats and state capacity (Thies, 2004; Gibler and Miller, 2014), but we also evaluate the consequences of this relationship. Capacity is not solely an outcome but also a causal factor in many literatures in the social sciences, including human rights (Cole, 2015; Englehart, 2009; Liou, Murdie and Peksen, 2020). We find that the factors that lead to capacity building may undermine a leader’s incentives to respect physical integrity rights. Identifying these divergent effects between threats and repression provides a fuller picture on the relationship between political development and physical integrity rights.

Furthermore, we believe our new measure of external threat better captures the latent concept of threat compared to previous measurement strategies. Threats play a pivotal role in international relations research, yet scholars disagree on measurement approaches (Trubowitz and Watanabe, 2021). We conceptualize external threat as the heightened risk of another state infringing on a given state’s sovereignty. Previous research on external threats usually use observable indicators to operationalize the concept (Colaresi, Rasler and Thompson, 2008; Gibler and Miller, 2014; Goldsmith, 2007). Instead of relying on one indicator to measure threat, the Bayesian latent measurement model uses several variables that existing research identifies as being associated with threat. This approach allows us to determine which observable indicators contribute

the most to our latent measure (Quinn, 2004).

Finally, our new measure could assist existing research programs interested in the effects of external threats. For example, scholars have looked at the role of external threats on domestic processes such as state centralization, economic development, industrialization, and military spending (Gibler, 2010; Gibler and Sewell, 2006; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Zielinski, Fordham and Schilde, 2017) Others have examined the external consequences of threats, such as alliance formation (Johnson, 2017; Edry, Johnson and Leeds, 2021). Our measure provides a means to study these or related topics, with a latent variable that has both temporal and spatial variance. Given the changing international threat environment, we expect that external threats will remain a focus in international relations and political economy research.

1 External threats and physical integrity rights

Why do some states respect physical integrity rights while others do not? International factors explain part of the variance. For example, previous research shows that international organizations (Greenhill, 2015), international law (Simmons, 2009), international NGOs (Murdie and Davis, 2012; Bell, Clay and Murdie, 2012), and greater international financial flows (Clay and Digiuseppe, 2017) all help reduce physical integrity rights abuses. On the other hand, military interventions (Peksen, 2012), troop deployment (Bell, Clay and Martinez Machain, 2017), and sanctions (Liou, Murdie and Peksen, 2020) increase repression under certain conditions.³

Besides external factors, scholars look to domestic factors to explain physical integrity rights violations. For example, democratic institutions provide citizens a low-cost mechanism to remove abusive leaders, thus democratic leaders have incentives to refrain from repression (Hafner-Burton, Helfer and Fariss, 2011; Dav-enport, 2007). In addition, democracies usually provide citizens with more avenues to peacefully express dissent, which reduces the demand for repression. However, democratic institutions do not guarantee physical integrity rights as states do not always have the capacity to prevent, detect, or punish violations (Englehart, 2009; Anaya-Munoz and Murdie, 2022; Cole, 2015). A leader might want to respect physical integrity rights, but state agents' preferences may diverge without proper compensation (Clay and Digiuseppe, 2017).

³Sanctions may reduce repression under special circumstances (Clay, 2018).

Poorly paid state agents have less incentive to follow rules as they can extract higher rents from civilians through repressive behavior (Englehart, 2009; Clay and Digiuseppe, 2017). If leaders cannot monitor, control, or punish agents, then abuses increase. Given this, capacity affords states more ability to comply with international human rights standards (Cole, 2015).

It is not a question of whether international factors or domestic factors explain repression. Both matter. What this study focuses on is the link between international factors and domestic conditions. Specifically, we ask how external threats of war affect state capacity, which subsequently affects government repression. The bellicist theory of state building, articulated by Tilly and others, connects external threats and capacity (Tilly, 1992; Thies, 2004). The threat of war prompts a state to consolidate and build force to protect state sovereignty. To pay for and manage this force, states need revenue generating capacity. Consistent with this, Gibler and Miller (2014) find that external territorial disputes increase capacity, while Thies (2004) finds that rivalries prompt capacity building.

External threats can also affect repression through other pathways. External conflict and repression may be complements to leaders: threats increase repression while domestic discontent may provide leaders diversionary incentives (Enterline and Gleditsch, 2000). Under the threat of war, leaders have more political opportunities to target domestic opposition groups under the guise of national security concerns. In general, leaders facing threats use repressive strategies to maintain power (Heffington, 2020; Bak, Chávez and Rider, 2020). Consistent with this, Heffington (2020) shows that threatening international conflicts adversely affect physical and civil rights.

Building off of the existing literature, we argue that external threats affect physical integrity rights through two pathways. First, threats incentivize leaders to invest in state capacity. Higher state capacity increases states' adherence to physical integrity rights. Second, threats also provide leaders incentives to repress opposition groups. These varying effects follow different pathways to repression. We outline those pathways in the next section.

2 The direct and indirect effects of external threats

We begin our argument by focusing on how external threats lead to greater state capacity. We conceptualize external threats as the likelihood of a state being targeted in military conflict by another state in the international system. Though wars start for many reasons, researchers focus on several core correlates of war, such as rivalries (Colaresi, Rasler and Thompson, 2008). Even rivalries that do not result in war, such as the Soviet Union and the United States, involve repeated hostile interactions which make leaders believe in the possibility of war (Thies, 2004; Bak, Chávez and Rider, 2020). In addition, territorial disputes between states increase the threat of war (Hensel et al., 2008; Gibler and Miller, 2014).

To address external threats, leaders must generate more fiscal resources for military preparedness. Unpreparedness against a threat invites opposition and criticism against the government. For example, Saudi Arabia was ill-prepared for the threat of an Iraqi invasion in 1990, thus prompting the government to host American troops as a deterrent. Saudi Arabia's decision to allow American troops within its borders was widely criticized by religious leaders and was one of the main grievances of Osama Bin Laden (Riedel and Saab, 2008). Questions were also raised about how the Saudi government misallocated its resources (Abalkhail, 1993).

To pay for military preparedness, leaders may shift resources toward the military while taking money from domestic spending programs. These social programs are usually popular and help leaders build legitimacy and support (Taydas and Peksen, 2012). This leaves leaders in a precarious position when facing threats: allocating enough fiscal resources to meet the threat without creating discontent among important constituents (Carter, Ondercin and Palmer, 2021).

To solve the problem, states can generate more resources. To do so, states must increase their extractive capacity to draw more fiscal resources from the general population. Under normal political conditions, attempts to build states' extractive capacity face resistance, as citizens are reluctant to provide financial resources to the state. Under external threat, however, we expect citizens to offer greater support to the leader in power. Greater support changes the bargaining dynamic between the leader and the populace, which means a leader can draw upon citizens' resources without as much resistance. Even if the opposition does not support the leader's decision to expand state capacity, we expect the general public to provide more

support for the leader in the face of an external threat.

Consistent with this expectation, previous research finds an association between conflict and increased state expansion, as measured by taxes (Scheve and Stasavage, 2010; Rasler and Thompson, 1989).⁴ Wars do not need to materialize, however, to motivate states to increase extractive capacity. For example, Thies argues that even the threat of war—specifically through the presence of international rivalries—increases capacity. Developing states with rivals experience a similar development process as European states (Thies, 2004; Lu and Thies, 2013).

As a result of this discussion, we expect external threats to increase state capacity. This expectation has been effectively argued and tested elsewhere (Thies, 2004; Lu and Thies, 2013; Gibler and Miller, 2014; Lektzian and Prins, 2008). Rather than repeat this argument, we instead focus on the consequences of external threats and increased capacity for physical integrity rights. To do so, we follow Cingranelli, Fajardo-Heyward and Filippov's (2014) principle-agent framework for explaining human rights. In this framework, the principals are the citizens, who we assume want their physical integrity rights protected. Government bureaucrats, including leaders, are the agents and will respect or abuse these rights depending on how it affects their positions of power. Cingranelli, Fajardo-Heyward and Filippov (2014) argue that fiscal rules affect this principal-agent dynamic in two ways. First, the more reliant leaders are on tax revenue, the less likely they will repress (Conrad and DeMeritt, 2013; DeMeritt and Young, 2013). Second, higher tax revenue allows for higher compensation for state agents, lessening the likelihood they will abuse physical integrity rights. With these expectations in mind, we examine how external threats and state capacity affect this principal-agent dynamic.

Focusing first on external threats for the moment, we expect external threats to increase state repression. While we assume citizens generally demand physical integrity rights, we expect demand to decrease in the face of external threats (Conrad et al., 2018).

External threats tend to produce "rally effects," prompting citizens to value safety, conformity, and deference to leaders (Gibler, 2010, 520). As a result, citizens provide leaders more leeway to address security risks, particularly risks from groups that may be viewed as supporting the aggressor. Minority rights and

⁴The bellicist relationship may depend on how leaders pay for war. Queralt (2022) shows that countries in the Global South that borrowed under "extreme conditionality" did not develop capacity.

inclusion become less of a priority (Davenport, 2007). Thus, external threats provide leaders more opportunities to repress with less fear of reprisal. The leader may go to extremes in order to silence the opposition, including targeting journalists, imprisoning opposition, or “disappearing” dissenters. External threats also provide leaders more opportunities to limit the physical rights of groups perceived as undermining states’ defensive efforts. For example, the U.S. began planning Japanese internment camps as early as 1936 to limit the possibility of domestic subversion (Robinson, 2001).

Moreover, external threats may produce more dissent which prompts leaders to repress. If leaders reallocate fiscal resources away from popular social spending programs toward military efforts, citizens may grow upset with the government. Military spending tends to slow general economic growth in the developing world, substituting for programs that provide employment, income, or subsidies (Adeola, 1996). As the government rescinds popular social programs, citizens may dissent against the government, which triggers repression (Ritter and Conrad, 2016). In addition, increased military preparedness provides the government with more coercive means to repress citizens or produce more state agents that will likely commit abuse. Consistent with this, previous research connects rivalries, conflict, and territorial disputes with repression (Bak, Chávez and Rider, 2020; Heffington, 2020; Wright, 2014).

From this discussion, we derive the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 *External threats increase government repression*

While external threats directly increase repression, we expect an alternative effect along an indirect path. If external threats increase state capacity, the increased state capacity decreases repression for several reasons. First, leaders’ need for more taxes makes them more deferential to citizen preferences on physical integrity rights (Cingranelli, Fajardo-Heyward and Filippov, 2014). Second, with more state capacity, citizens can better monitor state agents, dissuading these agents from committing atrocities. Monitoring mechanisms require information collection and more hired agents, all of which need funding. More capacity increases the chances that states can fund these efforts.

In addition, increased capacity provides the state with more potential fiscal resources with which to pay state agents more money. Better paid agents have incentives to adhere to physical integrity rights norms. Agents do not necessarily prefer to repress. Rather, they do so when the cost of avoiding abuse is too high.

Higher pay can offset these costs and serve as punishment for agents should they lose their position due to abuse (Englehart, 2009; Cingranelli, Fajardo-Heyward and Filippov, 2014; Clay and Digiuseppe, 2017). Thus, we expect state agents to increase their effort and protection of physical integrity rights with higher compensation.

Next, with more fiscal resources, leaders will pull less resources away from popular social spending programs and mitigate dissent. More capacity lessens the “guns and butter” dilemma of the government, allowing the leader to address both social spending and external threats. In general, capacity affords governments more fiscal flexibility which reduces repression (Clay and Digiuseppe, 2017).

Finally, with more capacity, the state can better train agents to uphold international standards of physical integrity rights. State agents may not be aware of international physical integrity rights standards. Alternatively, agents may be aware of these standards but not understand how to perform their duties without violating them. Training provides agents more information and more resources on how to best adhere to these standards. Training should also help with monitoring, as it teaches agents to identify and prevent situations where violations are most likely to occur.

From this discussion, we derive the two following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2 *External threats increase state capacity*

Hypothesis 3 *State capacity decreases state repression*

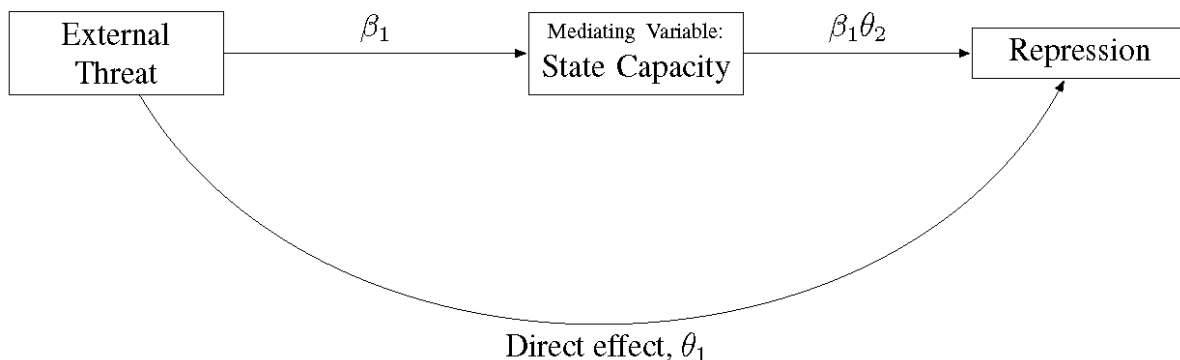
Thus far we have identified two paths through which external threats affect state repression. Directly, external threats increase repression. Indirectly, external threats can reduce repression through the mediating variable of state capacity. We suspect that since these two paths lead to contradictory results, we can explain why previous empirical research focused on interstate war and repression has found a weak or a mixed relationship (Davenport, 2007; Hill and Jones, 2014; Wright, 2020). To disentangle this relationship, we argue that capacity has a mediating relationship between external threats and state repression.

3 Empirical Analysis

To test our argument, we analyze non-OECD states data from 1980 to 2016 with country-year as the unit of observation.⁵ We focus on developing states for several reasons. First, developing states have yet to fully consolidate their state capacity and thus have the ability to improve capacity. If states have developed advanced capacity, we do not expect external threats to affect capacity. In addition, many OECD states have security agreements with the United States, which may mitigate the effects of threats.⁶

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between external threat, capacity, and repression.⁷ We first verify whether external threats increase state capacity. Then we test whether the increased capacity decreases state repression.

Figure 1: **Direct and indirect effects of external threats**



External threat has two expected effects on repression. The direct effect is expected to be positive, represented by θ_1 , as increased external threats increase state repression. This effect can be estimated through a single equation where we regress repression directly onto external threat. The indirect effect follows two stages. In the first stage, we estimate the effects of external threats on capacity, represented by β_1 :

⁵Some of the dependent variables we analyze have limited or no data available pre-1980 so we restrict the sample to 1980 and after. We show in the appendix that the main inferences hold when we do include data pre-1980.

⁶Analysis of threat and capacity in OECD countries in the appendix shows a null relationship.

⁷We note here that Liou, Murdie and Peksen (2020) have a similar design. They examine the direct and indirect effect of sanctions on human rights behavior, mediated by dissent and capacity.

$$E[\text{Capacity} \mid \text{External Threat}, C] = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{External Threat} + \beta_j C + v \quad (1)$$

where C is a set of control variables and their corresponding estimates, β_j . Then we regress repression on both external threat and the mediating capacity variable:

$$E[\text{Repression} \mid \text{External Threat}, \text{Capacity}, C] = \theta_0 + \theta_1 \text{External Threat} + \theta_2 \text{Capacity} + \theta_j C + \mu \quad (2)$$

The indirect effect is then calculated from the estimates of the two stages using the product-of-coefficients method, $\beta_1 \times \theta_2$ (VanderWeele, 2016).

We make several assumptions about the data to estimate the relationship between the treatment (external threat), the mediator (state capacity), and the outcome (repression). First, we assume the mediator is an intermediate step between the treatment and the outcome. In other words, levels of external threat should have an effect on state capacity, and state capacity in turn should have a separate effect on state repression. Second, we assume the mediator variable does not cause the treatment variable (VanderWeele, 2016). That is, we argue that the mediator and the treatment do not have a confounding relationship. While this is a strong assumption, external threats generally arise due to factors external to the threatened state, such as the interests, resources, or alliances between aggressor states. Third, we assume we have included potential confounding variables in our estimation. We provide support for this assumption by using previous research to inform our choice of covariates. Finally, we assume that the covariates in the model, except capacity, are not mediators which would introduce post-treatment bias (Imai and Yamamoto, 2013).

We account for both within and between country comparisons to difference away variation across state and year, respectively. The within country comparisons allow us to compare the variance within a given country. By using these within estimates, we control for variation that arises due to time invariant differences across states, such as culture or history (Zorn, 2001). The between variance, or year fixed-effects, are also particularly important given any temporal changes that affect multiple observations. In addition, we lag the covariates to ensure the correct temporal ordering of the variables. This results in an auto-distributive lag

model, which focuses on long term and non-contemporaneous effects.

3.1 Data

Dependent Variable In order to estimate the mediation relationship between external threats and repression, we use Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning's (2020) latent measure of abuse of physical integrity rights.⁸ Measuring state repression is difficult as state actors have incentives to obfuscate such behavior. To address this problem, Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning (2020) develop a Bayesian latent measure that accounts for potential under-counting of repressive events, while incorporating standards-based coding of physical integrity rights abuses.

States' behavior towards physical integrity rights constitutes a variety of behavior. Even repression can take many forms, ranging from imprisonment, kidnapping, torture, and killings. Some measures only focus on one behavior (Taylor and Jodice, 1983). Others focus on a standards-based approach, coding the degree of abuses into categorical values (Cingranelli and Richards, 1999; Gibney et al., 2018). Finally, some measures take an events-based approach that counts abuses and records the severity (Eck and Hultman, 2007). Instead of relying on one approach over the other, Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning's (2020) model incorporates several different physical integrity rights variables into a single measure, leveraging agreements and disagreements between measures.⁹ Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning's (2020) measure builds upon previous latent measures of physical integrity rights (Schnakenberg and Fariss, 2014; Fariss, 2014), but incorporates the uncertainty in count data related to government one-sided killings. State killings may be the result of leaders using external threats as a pretext to eliminate political opponents. Alternatively, state killings may be carried out by state agents in weak states without citizens' knowledge.

⁸These data are also called Human Rights Protection Scores (v4.01). For interpretation purposes, we multiply Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning's (2020) measure by -1, so higher values represent more abuses.

⁹The standards-based measures that underlie Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning's (2020) measure include: CIRI physical integrity data (Cingranelli and Richards, 1999; Cingranelli, Richards and Clay, 2014); the Political Terror Scale (Gibney and Dalton, 1996; Wood and Gibney, 2010); Hathaway Torture Data (Hathaway, 2002); and Ill-Treatment and Torture data (Conrad and DeMeritt, 2013; Conrad et al., 2011). The events-based measure includes: mass-repression (Harff, 2003; Harff and Gurr, 1988); Political Instability Task Force data on genocide and politicide (Harff, 2003; Marshall Monty, Gurr and Harff, 2009); genocide and democide (Rummel, 1994, 1995; Wayman and Tago, 2010); UCDP one-sided killing (Eck and Hultman, 2007; Sundberg, 2009); political executions (Taylor and Jodice, 1983); negative sanctions (Taylor and Jodice, 1983); and state-led mass killings (Ulfelder and Valentino, 2008).

To ensure our results are robust to our choice of dependent variable, we analyze alternative physical integrity rights outcomes as well. First, we examine Fariss's (2014) latent measure of physical integrity rights.¹⁰

In addition, we examine the standards-based Political Terror Scale (PTS) coding of U.S. State Department reports (Wood and Gibney, 2010). Higher values of this measure indicate more physical integrity rights violations. Finally, we also examine an event-based approach, using Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning's (2020) estimate of government killings, which is derived from their latent measurement model.

Independent Variable Like repression, external threat is latent. We conceptualize external threats as the heightened risk of another state forcefully infringing on a state's sovereignty. Existing research uses several alternative measures to capture this concept. For example, Heffington (2020) uses conflict as a measure of threat. A drawback of this approach is that conflict is the realization of risk to states, but not the risk itself. Threat should also reflect leaders' expectations of conflict (Johnson, 2017).

Alternatively, scholars have used rivalries or territorial disputes to capture the risk of threat (Bak, Chávez and Rider, 2020; Thies, 2004; Gibler and Miller, 2014). The advantage of these variables is that states in these conditions are more likely to perceive themselves in a threatening environment, without conflict necessarily appearing. One drawback is the measures do not capture the variance of threat within these conditions. The tensions between rivals rise and fall while the measures themselves remain constant. Similarly, territorial disputes are not always hotly contested. Non-rivalry and non-dispute states may feel threats from alternative sources, such as being a buffer state (Fazal, 2004) or experiencing a border crisis (Schultz, 2015).

Nordhaus, Oneal and Russett (2012) develop a latent measure of international threat by estimating the probability that a state is in a fatal militarized dispute within a dyad and aggregating that probability to create a monadic measure of threat. Nordhaus, Oneal and Russett's (2012) conceptualization of threat, however, is different than our own. We view threat as the risk of being targeted in conflict by another state. Nordhaus,

¹⁰These data are Human Rights Protection Scores v2.04. The standards-based components include: CIRI (Cingranelli and Richards, 1999; Cingranelli, Richards and Clay, 2014); PTS (Gibney and Dalton, 1996; Wood and Gibney, 2010); Hathaway Torture Data (Hathaway, 2002); and ITT data (Conrad and DeMeritt, 2013; Conrad et al., 2011). The events-based measure includes: mass-repression (Harff and Gurr, 1988); PITF data on genocide and politicide (Harff, 2003; Marshall Monty, Gurr and Harff, 2009); genocide and democide (Rummel, 1994, 1995; Wayman and Tago, 2010); UCDP one-sided killing (Eck and Hultman, 2007; Sundberg, 2009); and executions (Taylor and Jodice, 1983).

Oneal and Russett (2012) view threat as a risk of conflict, regardless of the aggressor. Leaders preparing to be attacked versus leaders initiating a war may trigger different political economy mechanisms.¹¹

Given the lack of an existing threat measure that fits our needs, we construct a new measure of external threat using a Bayesian latent measurement approach. We follow Quinn's (2004) Bayesian approach, which uses Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) for model fit.¹² This particular approach allows for the indicators to be either categorical or continuous. We provide more details of the estimation technique in the appendix, but in general this approach incorporates both standard normal theory factor analysis and item response theory.

To fit our measurement model, we use observable indicators previous studies identify as being with external threat. The first component of our novel threat measure includes the existence of a rivalry with another state for a country-year observation. We adapt the first component of our new measure from Colaresi, Rasler and Thompson (2008), who argue that rivalries involve state leaders who believe they are in competition with other states.¹³

Rivalries have far reaching implications, including for states not directly involved. Because of this, we include a binary measure that indicates whether a state acts as a buffer between at least two rival states (Fazal, 2004). Buffer states are an important component of threat as rivals often hope to acquire control of buffers to gain strategic advantages over one another. Thus, buffer states have a high risk of being invaded. We code a state as a buffer state if it offers a land-based path between rivals without having to enter another non-rival state.

Next, we include Gibler and Miller's (2014) territorial claim measure. This measure codes threat when a state leader makes a territorial claim to the land in another state. These territorial threats indicate a higher risk of military dispute as states either prepare to take the land or defend it.

A state's neighboring conditions are another component of threat. We include (non-allied) neighbors' military spending, gathered from SIPRI, because higher military spending signals to other states that a

¹¹Another promising measure of threat is using text-as-data (Trubowitz and Watanabe, 2021). This approach, however, has not yet been extended beyond the U.S. to a larger cross-section of countries.

¹²We followed the code and application by McManus and Nieman (2019). We thank the authors for making their replication materials available.

¹³We extend the data provided by these authors to 2016 using the same coding rules. We primarily gather information from news outlets and foreign policy documents to extend the data.

neighbor may be preparing for conflict (Goldsmith, 2007). This variable is coded as mean level of military expenditures as a percentage of GDP for all bordering states that do not have a defensive security agreement with the state in question.¹⁴ In addition, we include the number of borders a state shares with other states. We expect multiple borders to represent greater threat (Schultz, 2015).

Finally, we include a temporal measure of conflict behavior. This log-linear time trend counts the number of years since a state has been targeted in a militarized dispute. We expect that shorter time spans predict higher threat. The longer removed a state is from being targeted, the lower the threat. We use the Correlates of War (COW) Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data to code dispute targeting (Palmer et al., 2015).

The measurement model searches for patterns among the component variables. The stronger the association between the input variables, the more information those indicators provide the latent threat measure. So even imperfect proxies for threat contribute some information to the latent measure. Instead of arbitrarily deciding how much an input variable contributes to the measure, the association between input variables indicates how much the variables contribute to the measure. We constrained rivalry's contribution to the model to be positive, meaning positive values of the latent measure indicate more external threat. See the appendix for a more technical discussion of the model.

Table 1 provides a summary of the posterior distributions for the respective components. For the categorical variables, we can interpret λ_1 akin to an item discrimination parameter from an item response theory (IRT) model. Each of the categorical variables are positive and at least 2 standard deviations from zero, consistent with our expectation that each of these variables contribute some information to states' threat environment. Comparing variables to each other, territorial disputes contribute the most to the overall threat measure, followed by rivalries and buffer state status.

We interpret λ_0 as a negative item difficulty parameter from IRT. Variables with lower λ_0 values mean states with lower threat levels will be more likely to possess that attribute. So while being a buffer state contributes to the threat level (λ_1), the low λ_0 level means even states with low threat levels could be classified as buffer states. Conversely, we expect states with higher threat levels to have rivalries.

For the continuous variables, λ_1 should be interpreted as a factor loading. We standardized these vari-

¹⁴Defensive alliance data are take from ATOP (Leeds et al., 2002, v5).

Table 1: Posterior density summary of measurement model for external threat

	Interstate Rivalry	Territorial Dispute	Buffer State	Total Borders	Military Spending in Neighbor	Years since Targeted
λ_1	0.874 (0.045)	0.961 (0.045)	0.828 (0.054)	0.631 (0.014)	0.535 (0.014)	-0.458 (0.013)
λ_0	-0.355 (0.020)	-0.463 (0.045)	-2.036 (0.054)			
ψ				0.601 (0.016)	0.712 (0.015)	0.790 (0.015)

Means are reported without parentheses; standard deviations are reported with parentheses.

ables to ease comparability. As expected, higher military spending for non-allied neighbors and more borders positively contribute to threat. In addition, the longer since a state has been targeted in a conflict, the lower the threat.

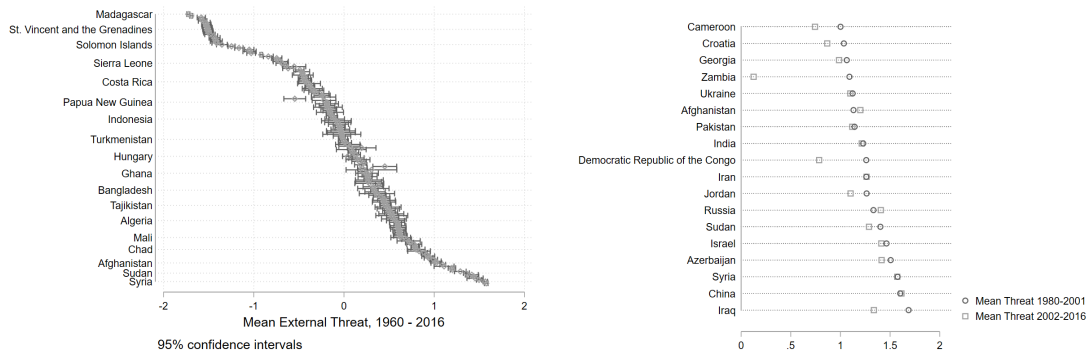
The ψ values are the estimated error variances for the continuous input variables. These values indicate that the latent level of threat explains a high amount for the individual variables. This substantiates our expectation that these variables contribute to a state’s threat environment.

In sum, the results from the posterior distributions in Table 1 support our expectations that the variables we identified as proxies for threat contribute to the overall measure. Before we use our latent measure of threat in the main analysis, we validate the measure by demonstrating that the values for threat are reasonable. We then plot the mean values of threat across the temporal span of the measure (1960-2016) in Figure 2a, labeling a subset of countries.¹⁵ Countries that have not experienced many external conflicts—such as Madagascar—are found on the lower end of spectrum. Conversely, countries which experience a high number of conflicts—such as Syria and Iraq—are at the higher end of the spectrum. We zoom into the highest values of threat and observe how these countries vary before and after 2001 in Figure 2b. Again, the countries we expect to be under highest threat have the highest values.

We further validate the measure by examining how well it predicts observable state behavior. First, we examine how well the threat measure predicts whether a state is targeted in a militarized interstate dispute. Using MID data, we find that threat has a positive and statistically significant relationship with

¹⁵The latent measure of external of analysis used in this study only extends back to 1960 because of data availability on military spending. The replication materials include an alternative latent measure of threat modeled on other data sources to extend the measure back to 1919. We discuss this in more detail in the appendix.

Figure 2: Descriptive graphs of external threat



(a) Mean external threat 1960-2016

(b) External threat changes 1980-2016

being targeted. Substantively, a one unit increase in threat increases the odds of being targeted by 526 percent. We also perform receiver operating characteristic (ROC) analysis, comparing the sensitivity and specificity of the threat measure across varying thresholds. In our bivariate model, we observe an area-under-the-curve (AUC) of 0.83. In addition, we find the relationship between threat and MID targeting holds across within and between variation. Following Zorn (2001), we include both the within and between estimator in a model predicting MID targeting. We derive the between estimator by taking the mean value of threat for a given country across all years in the panel data. We derive the within-estimator by taking the country-year threat value and subtracting the unit mean. Both estimates are positive and statistically significant, which suggests no one type of variance dominates our new measure.¹⁶

Next, we examine threat and military spending. States' military budgets are comprised of a myriad of external and domestic factors, but we expect they react to threats (Zielinski, Fordham and Schilde, 2017). We again use military spending data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and take the natural log, given military spending is positively skewed. Model 3 in Table 2 finds a positive relationship between threat and military spending. Model 4 again examines the within and between effects and finds both in the expected direction.¹⁷

¹⁶As a point of comparison, Nordhaus, Oneal and Russett's (2012) between-threat estimate is positive and statistically significant, the within-estimate is negative and insignificant, and the AUC is 0.73. See appendix for details.

¹⁷We observe similar results with Nordhaus, Oneal and Russett's (2012) threat variable.

Table 2: Validation of latent external threat measure

Dependent Variable:	Targeted in MID		Military Spending	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Threat	1.834*		0.015*	
	(0.283)		(0.004)	
(Within) Threat		1.651*		0.017*
		(0.438)		(0.007)
(Between) Threat		1.859*		0.014*
		(0.299)		(0.004)
log Military Spending (lagged)			0.953*	0.953*
			(0.009)	(0.009)
Constant	-4.690*	-4.686*	0.050*	0.050*
	(0.322)	(0.318)	(0.011)	(0.011)
R2			0.93	0.93
Log-Like	-751	-751		
N	8236	8236	6130	6130

* $p < 0.05$; Standard errors clustered on countries reported in parentheses.

Other variables Another key variable in our study is state capacity, which can be measured in multiple ways (Hendrix, 2010). We focus on states' fiscal capacity to be consistent with the bellicist state-building literature, using the fiscal capacity measure provided by V-Dem (v12).¹⁸ Fiscal capacity relates to the state's ability to extract resources from its residents or generate other forms of revenue. This differs from other measures, such as tax or bureaucratic capacity, because it does not directly measure whether a state extracts resources, but rather its latent ability to extract these resources.

We include a series of control variables to address potential confounding between threat and repression. We first include the log of the GDP, measured in millions of U.S. dollars. States with greater GDP often have the means to spend more on military as well as fiscal capacity. Data are drawn from the World Bank (World Bank, 2019). The natural log transformation helps correct for the skewness of the data. Similarly, states with stronger democratic institutions may have the means to implement better taxation systems, which lead to greater fiscal capacity. Accordingly, we include the V-Dem electoral democracy index as a control variable (Coppedge et al., 2020, v12). The index measures key components of democratic institutions, such as freedom of association, fair elections, and suffrage among others. We also include a binary measure for

¹⁸Following the codebook's recommendation, we drop observations with less than 3 expert responses.

whether the state is involved in an ongoing civil war, taken from the CDP/PRIO's Armed Conflict Dataset (Strand, 2006). State capacity may decrease during outbreaks of civil war (Thies, 2010; Liou, Murdie and Peksen, 2020). We include the natural log of the size of the population as our last covariate.

We address both unit heterogeneity and temporal variation. To do so, we rely on a within-unit estimator by subtracting country-year observation by the unit average in each of our statistical models. The estimator accounts for time invariant confounders. This approach is akin to including country fixed-effects, but provides more flexibility for mediation interpretation. In addition, we include year dummies in each model to account for temporal shocks and variation.

3.2 Results

Table 3 reports our main results. Model 1 shows the total effect of external threats on repression using Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning's (2020) latent measure. The coefficient for threat is statistically significant and represents the combined indirect and direct effects of threat on repression. We expect these two effects to act in opposite directions on repression. To separate these two effects, we first regress state capacity on external threat and control variables in Model 2. This model is consistent with our expectation that external threats increase state capabilities. Model 2 constitutes an intermediate step in the indirect path between external threats and repression. Model 3 replicates Model 1, but now treats capacity as a mediating variable. The coefficient for threat represents the direct effect of threat on repression. As external threat increases, state killings increase, consistent with our expectations. Substantively, a one standard deviation increase in threat increases repression by 14 percent of a standard deviation.

To calculate the indirect effect, we use the product-of-coefficients mediation approach (VanderWeele, 2016). We multiply the coefficient of external threat in Model 2 by the coefficient for capacity in model 3 in Table 3.¹⁹ We observe that external threats decrease state repression *through* increased capacity. To further illustrate the direct and indirect effects of external threat, we graph the effects with Imai, Keele and Tingley's (2010) non-parametric bootstrapping approach using the *mediate* package in R to estimate standard errors. The results, illustrated in Figure 3, are substantively similar to the product-of-coefficient results.

¹⁹We use the "paramed" package in Stata (v17) to calculate the standard errors.

Table 3: External threats, capacity, and state-killings, 1980 - 2016

	Latent Repression (1)	State Capacity (2)	Latent Repression (3)	Latent Repression (2014) (4)	PTS (5)	Estimated Govt Killing (6)
External Threat	0.290*	0.147*	0.311*	0.331*	0.231*	1.575*
	(0.046)	(0.023)	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.054)	(0.023)
Capacity			-0.134*	-0.143*	-0.114*	-0.244*
			(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.040)	(0.015)
Democracy	-1.859*	0.218*	-1.826*	-1.756*	-1.299*	-1.245*
	(0.095)	(0.079)	(0.095)	(0.090)	(0.122)	(0.050)
log of Population	0.482*	-0.157*	0.463*	0.344*	0.438*	0.882*
	(0.072)	(0.050)	(0.072)	(0.074)	(0.078)	(0.049)
log of GDP per cap	-0.122*	0.239*	-0.085*	-0.054	-0.133*	0.088*
	(0.036)	(0.023)	(0.036)	(0.033)	(0.045)	(0.021)
Ongoing Civil War	0.277*	-0.039*	0.271*	0.247*	0.268*	2.654*
	(0.028)	(0.013)	(0.028)	(0.026)	(0.035)	(0.011)
Constant	-0.003	-0.229*	-0.028	0.051	-0.605*	1.729*
	(0.107)	(0.074)	(0.106)	(0.091)	(0.109)	(0.028)
R-Sq	0.30	0.17	0.30	0.36	0.14	0.38
N	2997	3061	2997	2485	2980	2640
Indirect Effect of Threat			-0.020*	-0.022*	-0.018*	-0.017*
			(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.003)

* $p < 0.05$; Robust standard errors in parentheses. Year fixed effects included but not reported. Estimates represent within-unit fixed-effects

The direct and indirect effects are consistent with our expectations, with each pushing in opposite directions. The indirect direct effects are small, however, relative to the direct effects. So while external threats may incentivize leaders to invest in state capacity, the resulting decrease of repression because of this increased capacity is outpaced by state agents' incentives to use repression under the cover of an external threat. As a result, the total effect of external threat on repression is positive. How do these results translate to observable behavior? Given the results, we expect leaders facing increased external threats have more opportunities and incentives to repress political opponents, dissidents, or any perceived collaborators of the threatening state. At the same time, the threatened leaders have incentives to increase their states' capacity to help address the increased threat. Any benefits for physical integrity rights because of the increased capacity are outweighed by the direct effects. Overall, physical integrity rights are more at risk when external threats increase.

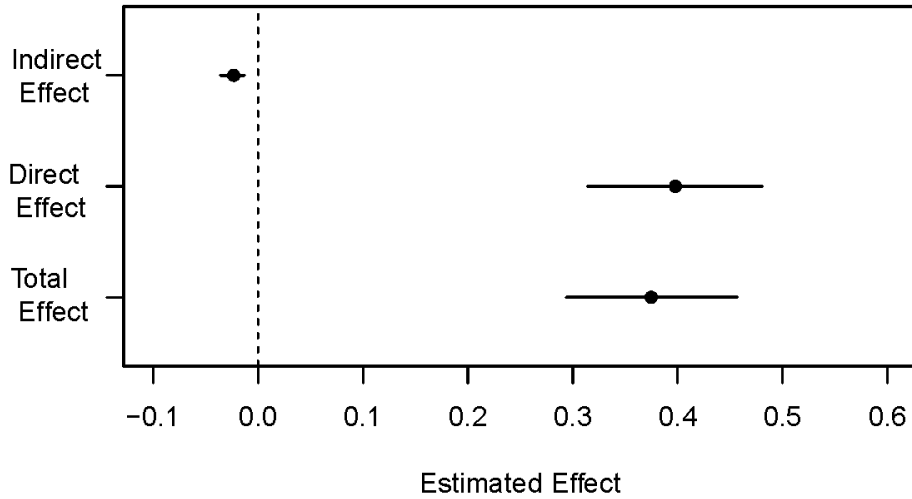


Figure 3: Mediation effects

To ensure the robustness of our results, we re-analyze the mediation models with alternative measures of repression. In Model 4 in Table 3, we use an earlier version of the latent measure of repression from Fariss (2014). We observe similar direct and indirect effects as in Model 3. Model 5 examines the standards-based Political Terror Scale from Wood and Gibney (2010), based on U.S. State Department reports. Again, we observe substantially similar direct and indirect effects. Finally, we consider the estimated count of government killing from Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning (2020) using a poisson model.²⁰ External threats directly increase one-sided killing and indirectly decreases one-sided killing through capacity. Again, the direct effects of threats on government killing are substantially larger than the indirect effects.

In summary, these results demonstrate that external threat affect repression along two pathways. Directly, external threats increase repression, while external threats indirectly decrease repression through the mediator state capacity. However, the direct effects of external threats are larger than the indirect effects, which means the total effect is positive. These results are consistent across a range of repression outcomes.

²⁰The results are robust to using a negative binomial model (see replication file). To estimate within-effects with count data, we rounded Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning's (2020) estimates to the nearest integer and followed DiGiuseppe and Shea's (2022) approach for non-linear models. This approach focuses on within estimation by adding the average government killing average value to the right-hand-side (not shown) then regressing on the count value.

We conduct additional analysis to ensure our results are robust to alternative model specifications. These results are consistent with our main inferences so we relegate them to the appendix. We briefly summarize them here. To begin, we examine the heterogeneous effects of threats by regime type, specifically analyzing differences between democracies and non-democracies. Given previous research, it is plausible that the relationship between threats, capacity, and repression differ in democracies and non-democracies. For example, democracies may enjoy better access to sovereign credit that would allow democracies to address threats without added capacity (Queralt, 2022). In addition, democratic leaders may be too constrained to use repression even in times of heightened threat (Davenport, 2007). Similarly, autocratic leaders may prefer repression but low capacity allows state agents to avoid fulfilling these demands. We test these possibilities and find suggestive, yet inconclusive evidence of a conditional effect. If the effect of threats on repression is conditioned by the continuous polyarchy measure, the effect is non-constant: repression is highest in the most autocratic and democratic regimes. The indirect effects, however, are stronger in non-democracies. Increased capacity in democracies does decrease repression, but at a smaller rate with more uncertainty.

We also considered alternative measures of threat. Specifically, we examine the component variables that were inputs in our latent threat measures. We also examine a broader measure of capacity that incorporates states' provisional services. These additional results do not change our main inferences and are discussed in more detail in the appendix.

4 Conclusion

This study furthers our understanding of three important concepts in international relations: physical integrity rights, capacity, and external threats. Our results show external threats increase leaders' incentives to use repression against their own people. We show that external threats are associated with higher levels of killings. This is slightly offset, however, by leaders' incentives to increase capacity when facing external threats. Yet, the incentives to use repression outpace the mollifying effects on increased capacity.

Empirically, we make two contributions to the existing literature. First, we develop a latent measure of external threat that should interest scholars focusing on the international threat environment. Threats play a prominent role in international relations research, as threats change states' behavior related to alliances,

spending behavior, and domestic political outcomes. Second, we show how threats can affect states' repressive behavior in direct and indirect ways. If we only focus on the total effect, we would underestimate external threat's effect on repression.

We see this as a first step and envision future research that can address the role of threats and repressive behavior. For example, we focus on governments respect for physical integrity rights in our empirical analysis, but external threats may lead leaders to choose to violate other types of human rights, such as civil liberties. Another potential research extension could be to identify which physical integrity rights violations are occurring the most in relation to external threats.

Finally, future research could explore the heterogenous effects of external threats. We briefly examined the conditional effects of threat across regime type, revealing a complex, non-linear relationship. Other domestic factors may moderate threat, such as ethnic fractionalization or political polarization. Alternatively, international factors such as alliances or integration in global economy may also matter. For example, Queralt (2022) shows that states borrowing from international credit markets under extreme conditionality may not need to augment capacity. We hope future research on repression, political and economic development, and alliance politics can make use of our new latent measure of threat and explore these possibilities.

Supplementary Material

The online appendix is available here:

Data Availability Statement

Replication data files can be found in Harvard Dataverse at:

<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/RYSUSL4>

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Competing Interests

None.

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