

**Rivalry and Empire:
How Competition among European
States Shaped Imperialism**

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Online Appendix

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A Online Appendix

This Online Appendix includes additional information and further discussion of claims that were made in the main body of the article. In [subsection A.1](#), I conceptually differentiate between major types of interpolity rivalry. In [subsection A.2](#), I reflect on the theory's character, scope, and applicability, including additional ways how my framework could be tested (and verified or falsified). In [subsection A.3](#), I discuss possible future theoretical extensions. In [subsection A.4](#), I examine whether direct/full control of overseas territories by empires is necessary for the theory's validity, especially for the first mechanism about the associated prestige gains. In [subsection A.5](#), I explain why the existence of some hierarchical interpolity relationships in Europe does not contradict the theory. In [subsection A.6](#), I discuss intra-elite heterogeneity and the associated possibility of uneven benefits from imperialism.

A.1 Variations in the Character of Interpolity Rivalry: Types of Military and Economic Competition

Interpolity rivalry occurred in two main forms: (1) military conflict and (2) competition for economic wealth/resources. Here, I attempt to conceptually differentiate between these two forms of rivalry, but in reality they often went hand in hand with one another. Specifically, the provision of funds for military forces typically required the existence of a functioning economy. Even when rulers were able to borrow money as a quick and powerful means of financing military build-ups, their baseline economic rents were a factor in lenders' willingness to give them access to resources ([Kennedy, 1988](#), 76–86; [Schultz and Weingast, 2003](#)).

Military rivalry can be subclassified into different types, which we may think of as levels of escalation, including (1) mutual suspicion and defensive preparations, (2) costly arms races and increasing tensions, and (3) outright and intense military warfare.¹

Moreover, Europe's political fragmentation also ensured the co-existence of a multitude of regional economies under different political leaderships. Thus, while military rivalry clearly was the primary dimension of competition, a secondary—and highly important—dimension of *competition for economic prosperity* emerged as well. The latter occurred in different forms, too. It included (1) mercantilist export and import strategies, (2) attempts to attract merchants to pay taxes/tariffs associated with their trade activities, and, finally, (3) rivalry for valuable territory. Particularly the last type had direct overlaps with military conflict.²

The two main explanations for the success of modern states (as the dominant type of political entity) when facing this *combination* of military rivalry and economic competition refer to (1) their superior resource-mobilization capabilities for war ([Tilly, 1990](#)) and (2) their success at reducing economic transaction costs through standardization ([Spruyt, 1996](#)).

¹Over time, the character of military rivalry changed as technology evolved. For example, the introduction of the pike led to a decrease in the combat relevance of cavalry, and the emergence of gunpowder and canons led to a decrease in the military relevance of fortifications. For detailed overviews of how changes in technology and tactics affected military conflict, see [Kennedy \(1988\)](#) and [Mann \(1986\)](#).

²Despite the theoretical insights from commercial liberalism and capitalist peace theory regarding the pacifying effects of economic exchange and prosperity, in the early modern period, economic competition often had significant potential to turn into military conflict. For further details on these important theories, see [Copeland \(2014\)](#), [Gartzke \(2007\)](#), [Keohane and Nye Jr. \(1977\)](#), [Schneider \(2014\)](#), and [Schneider \(2017\)](#).

A.2 Reflections on the Theory’s Character, Scope, and Applicability

The theory developed in the main body of the article represents a broad framework that aims to explain key dynamics of the European interpolity (or interstate) system throughout the (early) modern period (that is, from the late fifteenth to the mid-twentieth century).³ No theory—and especially no theory that has such wide-ranging ambitions—could ever perfectly apply to all cases. For this reason, I use this section to reflect on the theory’s character, scope, and applicability.

Importantly, the theory at hand is a *probabilistic* and not a deterministic theory. Other than deterministic theories, “probabilistic theories” make claims about how a specific cause increases the *likelihood* of observing a particular consequence. Thus, probabilistic theories *never* perfectly predict the outcomes of all cases or all situations. To the contrary, there is an unlimited number of additional contextual factors (with possible influence on the outcome) that cannot all be captured by my framework.

My primary claim is that the sustained and intense interstate rivalries of the European state system were an essential constituent part of imperialism.⁴ However, this does not mean that they were the *only* reason for imperialism. For instance, at several points throughout the article, I have highlighted the basic compatibility of my framework with Marxist theories that emphasize how the interests of private economic actors and general dynamics of capital accumulation also influence the incentives for imperialism.

While I have provided evidence for the validity of the framework’s causal mechanisms through two case studies, further tests of different kinds should be conducted in the future to examine the theory’s predictive power. Similar to the article at hand, future studies should pay special attention to evaluating evidence for the three mechanisms and the extent to which they apply in each case. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that, although the three mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, the degree to which they manifest themselves might vary from case to case. In certain instances, the second mechanism (about budget pressures) or the third mechanism (about powerful military interest groups) might be more decisive than the first one (about prestige). This is already visible in the presented case studies. While the first case study (on France and England) delivered the strongest evidence on the second mechanism, the second case study (on Britain and Germany) delivered the strongest evidence on the first and third mechanisms. Accordingly, it would be incorrect to claim that all mechanisms perfectly apply to all cases.

When additional empirical tests of the theory are conducted, the intensity, length, and character of rivalries will likely turn out to be key factors that decide whether or not they result in imperial expansion. The theory could be falsified if it could be shown that sustained and intense rivalries (among major powers in particular) are *generally* not associated with

³As elaborated in the article, this period is defined by (1) the development of oceanic transportation and navigation technology that enabled overseas imperialism (around 1450) (Abernethy, 2000, 177–179; Kennedy, 1988, 23–26) and (2) the transformation of the European state system through the Cold War and subsequent political-economic integration (around 1950).

⁴The study and the empirical cases have focused on overseas expansion, but, as touched upon in the article, imperialism also affected peoples and territories in Europe (e.g., Vogler, 2019a). This issue is discussed in more detail below.

any of the three mechanisms that establish the connection to imperial expansion. Thus, systematically observing evidence for the mechanisms is of crucial relevance to the theory's validity. We would expect that at least one mechanism applies when examining long, intense rivalries.

Furthermore, this theory could be empirically falsified if it could be shown that long rivalries with a mixture of episodes of (1) open military hostility and (2) more peaceful economic competition (as elaborated in the article) do not, on average, lead to some form of imperial expansion, as this alternation was described as highly relevant and impactful.⁵

While the two case studies presented here have mostly found confirming evidence for the three suggested mechanisms, a more extensive analysis should put partial emphasis on (potentially) disconfirming evidence. If the interactions between two polities that meet the scope conditions articulated in the introduction and that exhibit a sustained, intense rivalry do not reveal tendencies toward imperial expansion, it would be desirable to explore in detail why the predicted dynamics did not unfold.

Another possibility for evaluating the theory's implications is the identification of a world region that had access to similar naval technology like Europe, but in which the absence of sustained, intense interpolity rivalries prevented imperial expansion. East Asia may represent such a "counterfactual" because the technologies available to this region's rulers were similar to those available in Europe, especially at the beginning of the period (the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), but polities there were in more hierarchical and noncompetitive relationships (see [Kennedy, 1988](#), 4–9).

What are some additional cases that the theory could be applied to? First, the historical rivalry between Castile (a predecessor of Spain) and Portugal in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries might be an excellent candidate for another case study because it clearly was both intense and sustained. Alternatively, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan might be an interesting case as well. When Japan was forcibly "integrated" into the international system in the nineteenth century (and experienced threats associated with interstate rivalry), it started a process of internal reform. Once it had become capable of competing with the European powers (as demonstrated in the war with Russia in 1904/05), it also started to engage in imperial expansion in East Asia ([Matsuzaki, 2019](#); [Mattingly, 2017](#)).

A.3 Possible Future Extensions of the Framework

Theories represent abstractions from reality that isolate a limited subset of critical causal factors and connect them to an outcome through the establishment of clearly delineated mechanisms. Accordingly, it is neither desirable nor possible to represent the full complexity of reality within any theory itself. At the same time, it is very possible to further develop and complement existing theories with additional considerations and statements of conditionality. For instance, the mechanisms in any theory could have more or less predictive power depending on the presence or absence of certain additional conditions. While I do not intend to provide an exhaustive (or even comprehensive) account of how my theory could be expanded, in this section I briefly discuss a number of factors that would be prime candidates for additional conditions potentially relevant to future theoretical development.

⁵When evaluating the theory, one also needs to pay attention to the distinction between land and sea empires as articulated in the final paragraphs on the third mechanism.

A possible extension of my theory would be to consider how (1) increased wealth through late-stage industrial capitalism (Gartzke, 2007; Schneider, 2014; Schneider, 2017) and (2) international economic integration through globalization (Keohane and Nye Jr., 1977) affected the dynamics portrayed here. As these factors increase the costs of military conflict—possibly up to the point where confrontation becomes prohibitively costly—they are likely to alter my theory’s implications. Previously, I already suggested that the extreme destructiveness of the World Wars brought an end to the dynamics that are at the core of my framework. In particular the enormous gap between the wealth generated by industrial/post-industrial economies (that are typically deeply embedded in an international network of exchange) and the destruction caused by modern mass warfare could fundamentally mute the rivalry dynamics observed by me. Accordingly, while early or intermediary phases of industrialization may have led to an intensification of great power rivalries (see the section on the *Phases of Imperialism*), late-stage industrialization could make interstate warfare prohibitively costly.⁶

Another factor that we might consider is the difference in military or economic power between the states involved in a specific rivalry. In this respect, there could be nuances because two powers—even two great powers—are very unlikely to be similarly powerful in all respects. At the same time it should be emphasized that, by definition, a “rivalry” is a relatively symmetrical relationship. If one power unequivocally dominates another, then the relationship is not a rivalry but rather a “hierarchy.” Accordingly, while there can be some degree of power imbalance, the classification of rivalry would not apply to situations in which there is a highly uneven distribution of military or economic capacity between states.

Moreover, we could further distinguish between revisionist and established powers in particular. Usually, revisionist states are on an upward trajectory with respect to their economic and military power (starting from a lower level), while established powers are on a downward trajectory (starting from a higher level). If there is a noticeable difference in trajectories, this could affect the dynamics of my theory, too. For example, while they have not achieved full strength yet, revisionist powers may be more likely to limit their aggression to the engagement in arms races (and thus to avoid direct military confrontation with the established power). To the contrary, declining powers may be interested in initiating military conflict early so as to revert trends that are working against their interests (Copeland, 2000).

One could also further differentiate between minor and major powers, particularly in terms of population size. Sometimes, even states with smaller populations, such as the United Provinces of the Netherlands, were able to achieve great power status through their strong economy, strategic importance, and/or diplomatic influence, rather than the size of their population. It is possible that smaller great powers had a particularly strong incentive to gain prestige through territorial gains outside of Europe (as they were less likely to be able to win long wars against major great powers and occupy large territories on the continent itself), so the first mechanism about prestige gains might more directly apply to them.

As indicated, all of these additional factors and considerations could only be briefly discussed here. In future contributions on this subject, it would be possible to extend and modify my theory. Additionally, further case studies or more comprehensive empirical tests should be considered to test the new empirical implications of a modified framework.

⁶The combination of gains from economic exchange with the greatly increased costs of warfare contributed to the transformation of the European state system to a peaceful polycentric order (Vogler, 2020).

A.4 The Fragmentary Control of Colonial Territory

As touched upon earlier, numerous scholars argue that Europeans' ability to effectively control overseas colonies was often limited, especially during the period of preindustrial imperialism (Benton, 2009; Desbarats and Greer, 2011; Desbarats and Greer, 2015; Gaimard, 2021; Irigoien and Grafe, 2008, esp. 185–189; Miquelon, 1987, esp. 261; Sharman, 2019; Sharman and Phillips, 2020, esp. chap. 2; White, 1991; Witgen, 2011). In line with this observation, territories were frequently just nominally claimed by empires, while actual control and the monopoly on violence were geographically limited (typically to cities and coasts).

Do these circumstances violate the theory? Many arguments suggest that they do not. First, the control of cities and coasts (and the associated ability to engage in asymmetrical trade) often already constituted significant military-strategic and economic-material benefits to the respective imperial power. Moreover, similar to the widespread (but not necessarily consistently valid) *belief* that imperialism would result in economic profits, the mere *perception* that territory belonged to a specific polity's sphere of influence often brought prestige gains for its political elite. Among others, this is visible in tensions over colonial border placements that arose *throughout* the history of imperialism. Such tensions emerged even when no empire had the actual military or administrative capacities to fully control a territory or enforce a monopoly on violence there (cf. Benton, 2009; Desbarats and Greer, 2015). Accordingly, because even just the nominal assignment of territories to imperial powers mattered tremendously, the fragmentary or imperfect control of territories does not fundamentally contradict any of the theoretical mechanisms that are parts of the framework developed here. Instead, the fact that *mere perceptions* about territorial control were of such importance highlights the enormous potential for prestige gains associated with imperialism.

Furthermore, given the significant restrictions on communication and transportation technologies in the early modern period (cf. Chapman, 2017; Sharman, 2019), a related issue was that imperial representatives often enjoyed a high level of discretion with respect to policy decisions. Thus, the behavior of those representatives was not always under the empire's full control and could sometimes even contradict its interests or directives (Banks, 2002; Förster, 1992; Gaimard, 2021; Greer, 2022; Sharman and Phillips, 2020, 34).

Do these circumstances violate my theory in some way? Arguably they also do not. My framework is primarily focused on the three mechanisms that connect interstate rivalries to imperialism. The fact that local representatives of empires often enjoyed a high level of discretion (regarding the day-to-day tasks of governing colonies) does not violate the validity of any of these mechanisms. Furthermore, I previously suggested that the character of imperialism exhibits enormous variation over time and across space. The fact that imperial representatives had some leeway regarding the management of colonies is fully in line with my argument about such variation. Similarly, an essential building block of my theory is the proposition that, once a state equips any group of individuals with significant economic or coercive means, they will likely become an interest group with their own preferences (cf. Vogler, 2019b, 43–44). Finally, the relative autonomy of imperial representatives is a potentially important part of the argument regarding feedback loops. This is so because relatively autonomous representatives may engage in actions that provoke conflicts unintended by the imperial center, which could then further escalate. In sum, relative autonomy of imperial representatives does not violate my theory, but it is rather fully compatible with it.

A.5 Hierarchical Relationships within Europe

A potential criticism of my theoretical framework and analysis is that it neglects the hierarchical and exploitative relationships that existed between some polities *within* Europe. After all, there were also major European *land* empires that integrated a large number of smaller polities into their spheres of influence. These relationships were often characterized by coercion and exploitation, which means that they meet my definition of imperialism and were far from symmetrical (e.g., Becker et al., 2016; Vogler, 2019a).

There are two primary responses to this criticism. First, my theory about sustained and intense rivalries primarily focuses on Europe's major powers. While minor states and other polities were sometimes able to effectively participate in this great power competition (among others by allying themselves with major powers or by gaining economic prosperity, which is a possible foundation for military strength), some were incorporated into or dominated by Europe's land empires (for instance, the Habsburg Empire). Indeed, mechanism III of my theory highlights that states with powerful armies were more likely to focus on establishing such land empires (by incorporating smaller adjacent polities into their spheres of influence).

Second, my theoretical framework does not in any way deny the possibility that European states acquired and subjugated additional territory on their own continent. Instead, in the section that focuses on the origins of rivalry in Europe, I explicitly describe the military conquest, subjugation, and integration of new territories as a key means for ruling elites to improve their relative status. At the same time, this part of my analysis also elaborates on the geographic, climatic, and political factors that eventually put limits on the expansionary ambitions of any European land empire. Sooner or later further territorial conquest within Europe became prohibitively difficult, among others because it meant facing defenders with superior knowledge of and accustomedness to extremely diverse local conditions. Additionally, local defenders were often supported by another great power that recognized the potential threat to its own position. Therefore, it was nearly impossible for any European land empire to occupy the entire continent. All attempts at achieving this goal, even if they appeared successful at first (such as the Napoleonic conquest of large parts of Europe), were eventually shattered.

In short, while the existence of hierarchical and exploitative relationships among some polities within Europe may, at first glance, seem to be potentially contradictory to my theory, my framework's focus on major powers and its detailed analysis of the desire by rulers (including the rulers of European land empires) to enlarge their spheres of influence means that it is fully compatible with the parallel existence of competitive and noncompetitive relationships within Europe. In general, though, the dominant logic of Europe's state system was one of competition and rivalry.

A.6 Intra-Elite Heterogeneity and the Uneven Benefits of Imperialism

As indicated above, every theory represents a simplification of reality. The theory developed in this study is no exception. For instance, in my framework, I have often treated rulers and (political/ruling) elites as relatively homogeneous groups. In many historical cases, however, even elites within a single polity exhibited some degree of heterogeneity. For instance,

political and economic elites could consist of multiple groups with varying interests, such as the holders of executive power, a broader group of landed elites, ecclesiastical elites, and merchant/entrepreneurial elites. Furthermore, even within a single polity's ruling elites there could be substantial disagreement over foreign policy goals. Because different elite groups profited from imperialism to different extents, their interest in the specifics of imperial expansion likely differed as well.

Elite heterogeneity and intra-elite disagreements became even more significant factors when industrialization led to a steep increase in socioeconomic complexity in the nineteenth century. This is so because, increases in socioeconomic complexity also induced the diversification of elite groups, and thus their preferences and political agendas (Paniagua and Vogler, 2022).

My response to these important points is two-fold. First, my theory already includes some segmentation/differentiation of elite groups as the third causal mechanism is fully focused on the emergence of a new (elite) interest group (in addition to ruling elites), namely militaries and military leaderships. Also, in the same section, I already distinguish between how armies and navies typically exhibit different preferences for land versus sea empires. Accordingly, the relevance of elite heterogeneity is already acknowledged within the theory.

Second, in order to better embrace the fully complexity of potential intrapolity elite disagreements, future studies should explore these specific dynamics in more detail, especially with respect to potential elite disagreements over the key subject of imperialism. Such explorations would represent additional extensions of my framework and could be particularly valuable in terms of further refining the three mechanisms developed in the article.

Third, even if there were disagreements over foreign policy within a polity's elites, the sheer intensity of European military rivalries, which regularly included open warfare, often forced those elites to be at least somewhat cohesive. Fundamental and persistently irreconcilable disagreements over foreign policy could mean a (deadly) disadvantage in Europe's highly competitive state system and carried the clear potential of a polity's downfall. Therefore, competitive processes, especially when a polity's survival was threatened, likely contributed to a partial reduction in the degree of intrapolity elite conflict.

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