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The Tyranny of Distance: Assessing and Explaining the Apparent Decline in U.S. Military Performance

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There is a growing sense that US military effectiveness has been on the wane in recent years. Is this the case? If so, what are the reasons for the decay in American combat performance? We first examine the available systematic evidence for American military decline, showing that the United States has indeed experienced a drop in the quality of outcomes of its military contests. Observers have offered a number of explanations for declining American military success, most predominantly an increase in intrastate conflict after the Second World War. After showing that a decline in performance is observed even after fully excluding intrastate conflict, we propose an alternative explanation: the increasing distance from home at which the United States has been fighting. Distance is tyrannical: it saps military strength and increases the cost of contests, even as it reduces US expertise and motivations to prevail. We then show that the distance from home at which the United States fights is the best predictor of the outcome of the conflict. We conclude by noting some avenues for future research and policy implications as the world returns to great power competition.

> *When I was young, in high school and in college, everybody used to say we never lost a war. America never lost. Now, we never win a war.* — President Donald J. Trump (cited in Boyer 2017)

In recent years, perceptions of declining US military performance have created consternation and even fear in American political discourse (Keating 2013; Perry 2017). The sense that the United States has lost its military mojo has critical implications for defense budgeting, force posture decisions and planning, propelling these important functions in different directions depending on how one interprets (the lack of) US military success. Optimism and pessimism about US military performance seem to cycle with contemporaneous events. For a generation following the Vietnam War, American foreign policy adhered to what became known as the Powell–Weinberger doctrine, discouraging limited or speculative uses of force. With the end of the Cold War, questions were raised about the utility of a large and expensive military. Advocates of a more interventionist US foreign policy appeared to have found a purpose for this military that precisely contradicted Powell and Weinberger. As then UN Ambassador Madeline Albright famously challenged Chairman Powell in 1993, "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" Stalemate in America's longest conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan has seen the impetus for intervention again reverse itself, with President Trump promising graduates at the United States Military Academy "We are ending the era of endless wars." Trump went on to say that it was not the job of the US military to solve ancient conflicts in faraway lands that many people have not even heard of.

What accounts for this variation in military performance, in turn triggering disparate policy reactions? Observers offer a number of explanations for the muted character of American military achievement, ranging from the volunteer force and resulting isolation of US military culture to the changing character of modern combat, to inadequate civilian or military leadership or strategy (Ricks 2012; Fallows 2015; Tierney 2015; Mansoor 2016; Ullman 2017). Perhaps most prominent among scholarly explanations for the modern downturn in military success is a putative transition from international to interstate conflict after the Second World War (Tierney 2015). Since 1945—and especially since the end of the Cold War—the United States has increasingly found itself engaged in guerilla wars against non-state military forces. The Black Hawk Down incident in Somalia in the early 1990s, the post-Saddam insurgency in Iraq, the disappointing aftermath of the 2011 Libya intervention, and the two-decade long war in Afghanistan all illustrate the difficulty America has experienced in attempting to prosecute interventions against non-state actors.

We, however, offer a different explanation contributing to the lack of US military success in recent decades: the increasing distance from the continental United States at which US military forces are increasingly asked to fight. There are several reasons to suspect a growing reliance on this "away game" of power projection that might have several deleterious consequences for combat effectiveness. First, power decays with distance, ensuring that American dominance is less prominent thousands of miles from US shores.[1] Second, interest dwindles with distance: issues or factors that are

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[1] Kenneth Boulding (1962) described this phenomenon as the "loss of strength gradient."

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physically remote understandably appear less important, valuable, or familiar, increasing the odds that national resolve will slacken more than the resolve of an adversary. Together, these factors impose a "tyranny of distance" on American attempts to prevail in disputes in places that are necessarily remote and over issues that are of tangential interest.[2]

This article takes the notion of declining US military performance seriously, attempting to put both the claim and its causes on a more rigorous footing. To do so, we begin by subjecting the assertion to a systematic empirical test. We find that the United States does indeed appear to be suffering a decline in military victory over time—even when we exclude intrastate conflict, the most prominent contemporary explanation for this phenomenon. Given that wars are extremely rare, we examine a broader range of conflict behaviors to provide a more reliable assessment of relationships and trends. We then discuss the possible reasons for this tendency, arguing that a chief source of the problem has to do with the tyrannical effects of distance, as outlined above. Finally, we conclude with some observations about what our findings mean for US foreign policy. In particular, we suggest that military adventurism offers declining prospects for victory (Snyder 1994). Future research will explore whether our findings are generalizable to other nations with different power relations and different geographical circumstances. For now, our focus on US military prowess can be justified in terms of America's role as hegemon. A growing perception that the United States can no longer defend all of its international commitments has consequences for world affairs (Kennedy 1989).

Evidence of Decreasing US Military Performance over Time

The sentiments of President Donald Trump quoted above are far from unique or partisan. A large number of public officials and commentators have expressed concerns that the United States seems to have become less successful in recent years in prosecuting military contests than it was in the more distant past. While the United States was able to score decisive victories against Mexico (1846–1848), the Confederacy (1861–1865), Spain (1898), the Central Powers in World War I (1917–1918), and the Axis Powers in World War II (1941–1945), it has simply not been as proficient at winning wars in the post-World War II era. Stalemate in Korea (1950–1953) gave way to failure in Vietnam (1964–1973), and at best mixed results in Afghanistan (2001–present) and Iraq (2003–2011). The seemingly clear victory of the Gulf War (1991) was the exception, and even so would lead to simmering disputes that only ended with the less successful intervention a decade later. It might thus seem that the United States has not been able to decisively win a war since the Greatest Generation defeated the Axis nations in 1945 (Mansoor 2016; Ward 2018).

Reviewing the list of major American military contests provides a degree of face validity to the claim of declining US performance in combat. Wars are infrequent, however, creating the risk that accident or episodic bad luck, rather than an actual decline in military effectiveness, may be shading perceptions about American military success. The assertion of military decline by the United States may be biased by a disproportionate focus on the small number of large disputes or wars. Most contests are less intense, and naturally receive much less attention when forming intuitions about behavior, but nonetheless are an important source of information about military effectiveness. We look at data on militarized conflict over a broader set of contests in order to provide a thorough assessment of the claim that US military success has declined over time. We examine results from two subsets of conflict data: first, all militarized interstate disputes (MIDs), and, second, only those MIDs that escalate to uses of force. By using two different definitions of military conflict—and demonstrating similar trends regardless of the definition of conflict behavior—we hope to assuage concerns regarding classifications.

The MID dataset codes outcomes for each dispute as either (1) a victory for one side and defeat for the other, (2) one side yielding to another, or (3) one of a number of other classifications with indeterminate outcomes.[3] We have translated the MID coding into a five-point ordinal variable ranging from (1) US Loss, (2) US Yield, (3) Indeterminate, (4) Opponent Yield to (5) US Victory. Note that as a robustness check we reran all models using two alternative coding schemes: a binary coding (0—US Loss or US Yield or draw, 1—Opponent Yield or US Victory) or a three-point scale (1—US Loss or US yield, 2—draw, 3—Opponent Yield or US Victory).[4] The findings are in no way materially affected by these alternative codings and can be viewed in appendices C and D.

Note that by relying on the MID dataset as our main data source, we focus solely on interstate conflict. If growth in intrastate interventions in the postwar period is the primary driver of declining US military performance, then these data should not reveal any such trend, since by definition the MIDs data do not include variation in the putative cause. If in contrast, as we find, a trend in military success exists even when only considering interstate disputes, then some other factor must (also) be at work.

Militarized Interstate Disputes

MIDs involve a broad range of conflict behaviors, and are thus much more frequent than full-scale wars (Braithwaite 2010; Palmer et al. 2015; Bezerra and Braithwaite 2017; Maoz et al. 2019). The United States has participated in over three hundred MIDs in the period between 1816 and 2010.[5] MIDs are defined as "historical cases of conflict in

[2] Blainey (1973) used the term to refer to Australia's geographical isolation and its effect on economic growth.

[3] "Victory: A victory is defined by the favorable outcome achieved by one state through the use of militarized action that imposes military defeat upon the opponent. It denotes either the attainment or the protection through direct force of a tangible piece of territory; or a change in, or protection of, a specific policy, political regime, or some other goal. A victory can be identified whenever one or more state(s) are able to secure a favorable outcome through the direct application of successful military actions. Yield: A yield is defined by the submission by one state to the demands made by another state, other than those directly attributable to the threat, display, or use of military force. As an outcome of a MID, a yield can be identified whenever one state capitulates by offering concessions that appease the demands of another state before the militarized forces of either state have secured any substantial tactical gains on the battlefield." (Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004, 137).

[4] The three-point scale coding scheme seems to be popular among other authors (Weeks 2014; McManus 2017; Maoz et al. 2019).

[5] Other datasets commonly utilized in empirical studies of international conflict were considered for use but were ultimately found to be inadequate for our purposes. The UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset only includes conflicts after 1945, and thus excludes much of the time period we sought to study (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Kreutz 2010; Pettersson and Eck 2018). Furthermore, only twelve relevant armed conflicts were found when utilizing the dataset. And while data from the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) dataset contain highly useful information about seventy-one crises involving the United States, the dataset lacks good locational data and US observations only extend back to the Panay incident of 1937 (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 2000; Brecher et al. 2017). MIDs data coverage extends

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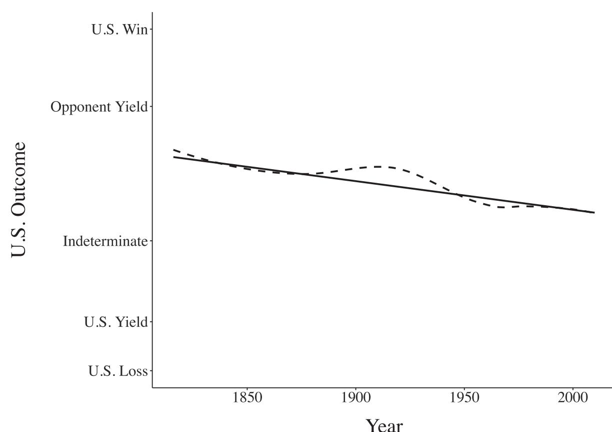

Figure 1. Performance (outcomes) of US MIDs across time.

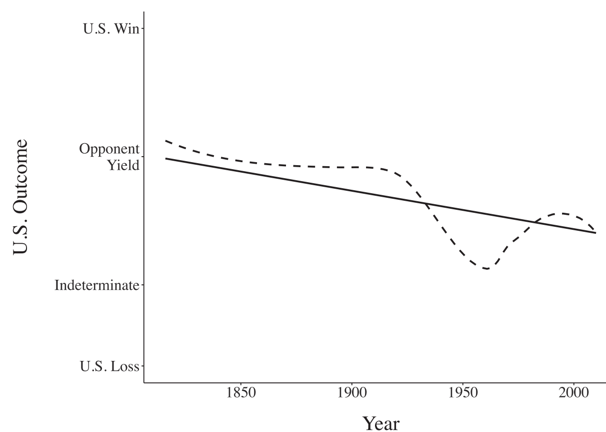

Figure 2. Performance (outcomes) of US MID uses of force across time.

which the threat, display or use of military force … by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state. Disputes are composed of incidents that range in intensity from threats to use force to actual combat" (Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996, 163). The dataset thus ranges from minor non-violent confrontations to the largest wars fought by the United States over nearly two centuries.

Looking at all US MIDs over the time period 1816–2010, we see clear evidence of a declining trend in US military success. Figure 1 details this trend, with time (year) displayed on the horizontal axis on the graph and military performance (outcome) listed on the vertical axis. Two trend lines are provided for comparison: a solid linear trend line and a dashed locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS) smoothed non-linear trend. Both trend lines are downward sloping; US military performance—as measured by MIDs—has been declining across time. Indeterminate outcomes include those coded as either stalemates, compromises, or those with unclear outcomes according to the MIDs dataset (Palmer et al. 2015). Examples of these include the Samoan Crisis, the Korean War, excursions into Cambodia during the Vietnam War, The 1980s "Tanker War" in the Persian Gulf, and the "no-fly zones" operated over Iraq in the 1990s. Outcomes in disputes such as these fell short of clear victory, but were likewise not clear defeats.[6]

MIDs, however, are made up of a broad range of military encounters, ranging from minor fishing disputes to the Second World War. Roughly two-thirds of these events fall short of actual use of force. Cases with no overt violence may be extraneous; the sample may be too broad. Between the low threshold of all MIDs and the high threshold of "War" lies a middle-of-the-road threshold involving at least some actual use of force.

Uses of Force

It is desirable in evaluating US military success to identify a sample of conflicts that reflects real-world conditions relevant to the issue of performance. Wars—whether defined either as those conflicts involving formal declarations of war, or those violent interstate encounters yielding a high threshold of battle deaths—clearly do not include the vast majority of actual employments of military force by the United States. Conversely, many MIDs consist of behaviors that do not really have the same overt performance criteria as kinetic military conflict: it is difficult to determine whether a country "won" a display of force.

Our definition of a "use of force" is narrower than that of MIDs in general, but broader and more expansive than that of a "war." More specifically, wars are a subset of all uses of force, which, in turn, are a subset of all militarized disputes. Unlike MIDs, a "use of force" requires actual violence, and thus mere threats to use force, or displays of force, are not sufficient to be considered an armed conflict.[7] But, in contrast to the relatively high threshold of fatalities required for an event to be considered a "War" under the Correlates of War (COW) definition, the Laws of Armed Conflict, for example, would apply even when there are minimal casualties.

This middle threshold restricts our sample to conflicts in which performance is likely to be highly salient politically. US leaders do not want to be seen as "losers" because poor performance in armed conflicts can have important domestic US political repercussions. Consider, for example, the failed Operation Eagle Claw—and the Iranian Hostage Crisis more generally—and its possible effect on President Carter's unsuccessful re-election bid in 1980. Uses of force appear also to be part of the informal calculation producing perceptions of US military performance. At the same time, there are enough uses of force to allow for relatively subtle inferences about trends in these data. While there were 306 US MIDs and only 11 COW-defined Wars, there are 102 relevant US uses of force. Despite this refinement to eliminate militarized acts that are unlikely to trigger international condemnation or domestic expectations, the same temporal trend is once again revealed in these data. As Figure 2 reports, US military success is declining over time. Thus, there seems to be an equivalent trend of diminished US military success when looking at all MIDs or just uses of force. Again, because these data exclude intrastate conflict, a transition from interstate to intrastate

back to the end of the Napoleonic Wars and includes reasonably accurate location data and codes for outcomes in a useful way not matched by other datasets.

[6] The results presented below are robust even when considering alternative coding schemes for events with "indeterminate" outcomes. We classify negotiated releases as "enemy yields" in favor of the United States, but alternately considering them as indeterminate (or fully removing negotiated releases from the dataset) does not materially alter the results. Similarly, removing "unclear" outcomes from the dataset does not substantially alter the findings.

[7] The MIDs classify "threat to use force" and "display of force" as hostility levels 2 and 3, respectively. Threats to use force and displays of force include threat to use force, threat to blockade, threat to occupy territory, threat to declare war, threat to use Chemical, Biological, and Radiological weapons, threat to join war, show of force, alert, nuclear alert, mobilization, fortify border, and border violation.

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conflict over time cannot account for the decline in US combat performance observed here.

Fighting Farther From Home

The observation that the United States has been less successful in its recent interstate armed conflicts than in those prior to the Second World War suggests that we cannot rely solely on a transition from interstate conflict to civil conflict to account for an apparent decline in American military acumen. Other possible explanations given by observers range from increasing US unilateralism to strategic mistakes.[8] One line of thinking emphasizes that the lack of US martial success may be due to strategic mistakes on the part of civilian or military leaders (Mansoor 2016). Using the traditional Ends–Ways–Means conception of strategy, authors have noted problems with sub-optimal utilization of ways, such as heavy US reliance on unilateralism (Perry 2017). With seemingly limitless resources and military capabilities, the United States has perhaps not always chosen wisely concerning how it conducts its fights in recent years.[9] Some scholars and pundits have argued that the ends sought by US policymakers have become increasingly unrealistic, such as setting expectations for performance or outcomes implausibly high (Sullivan 2012). Other observers emphasize that strategic or tactical errors may be driven by the ideological disposition of US foreign policy elites (Porter 2015, 2018; Posen 2015) exacerbated by the means provided by a unipolar moment (Mearsheimer 2018), or by a national culture that gives too much deference to military expertise (Fallows 2015). While many of these theories could plausibly be at work even when just considering interstate conflict, most still implicitly rely at least in part on the increase in US interventions in civil conflicts over time. One explanation that has thus far received little attention in this debate, however, is the effect of proximity on conflict outcomes.

Since antiquity, keen observers of military affairs have recognized the harmful effects of distance on a nation's military power. Boulding (1962) described the phenomenon as the "loss of strength gradient." Interestingly, however, Boulding also suggested that such a loss of strength might be lessening over time. Distance might even become irrelevant given improvements in airpower, communications, and transportation technology. The United States has gone to great lengths to improve its power projection capabilities via forward basing and the procurement of platforms better able to mitigate the effects of distance (e.g., aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, long-range bombers, and ICBMs). Globalization itself is seen as a triumph of technology over geography; a "global village" may have formed due to advances in communication and transportation (Deudney 2009; Porter 2015). Others, however, question this assertion, arguing that the loss of strength gradient continues to inhibit a nation's global reach (Webb 2007). Porter distinguishes between physical distance and strategic distance, and argues that while developments such as railroads, airplanes, and missiles facilitate movement across physical space better than ever before, other technological advances have had the opposite effect and made military action more difficult than it might have been in the past (Porter 2015). For example, the development of sophisticated radar and anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) systems in East Asia and Eastern Europe have made it more difficult to project military power in these regions.

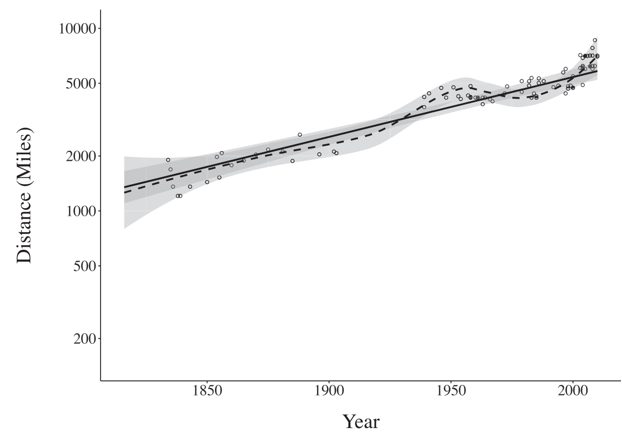

Figure 3. The distance of US MIDs from the US capital (Washington), by year.

While there may be no consensus as to whether advances in technology have rendered distance moot, anecdote suggests indeed that American forces have fought at greater distances from US territory over time. While the United States fought both the Mexican–American and Spanish–American Wars in the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth century, the world wars of the twentieth century saw the deployment of massive forces to Europe and East Asia. During the Cold War, US forces moved even farther abroad as conflicts on the Asian mainland—in Korea and Vietnam—became battlefields in the global ideological struggle. Invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the twenty-first century led to deployments still farther from the continental United States as US forces were introduced to the Middle East and South Asia. Regardless of whether one considers wars, MIDs, or uses of force, the United States has tended to fight farther from "home" over time.

Figure 3 plots the distance from the US capital of American MIDs. Both the regression line and locally estimated scatterplot smoothing curve show a clear upward trend, confirming that the United States has been engaging in militarized disputes at greater distances from US territory over time. Note especially the large grouping of MIDs in the upper-right corner of the plot, representing postwar disputes in East Asia and the Middle East. The drift toward distant conflicts is also substantively large. Where early nineteenth Century US MIDs occurred on average at roughly 1,300 miles from Washington DC, by the first decade of the twenty-first century, the average distance of an American dispute from the US capital was over 6,000 miles, an increase of almost five times.

Figure 4 plots uses of force involving the United States, again reporting the trend toward increased distance over time.

As in Figure 3, the uses of force plotted in the upper-right corner consist mainly of encounters in East Asia and the Middle East. Even after the conclusion of the Korean Armistice in 1953, military encounters continued along the DMZ—and in the air and sea surrounding the Korean peninsula. In Southeast Asia, the United States used military force not only in Vietnam, but also in neighboring Cambodia and Laos. US aircraft operating from Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin also occasionally engaged

[8] Note that we do not directly consider the broader literature attempting to explain intervention outcomes in general as these do not address the specific time trend we focus on here. Research assessing the success, or lack thereof, of uses of force is developed in Kavanagh et al. (2019, 7). See also *Why big nations lose small wars: The politics of asymmetric conflict* (Mack 1975).

[9] According to Cicero, "arms are of little value in the field unless there is wise counsel at home" (1913, 78).

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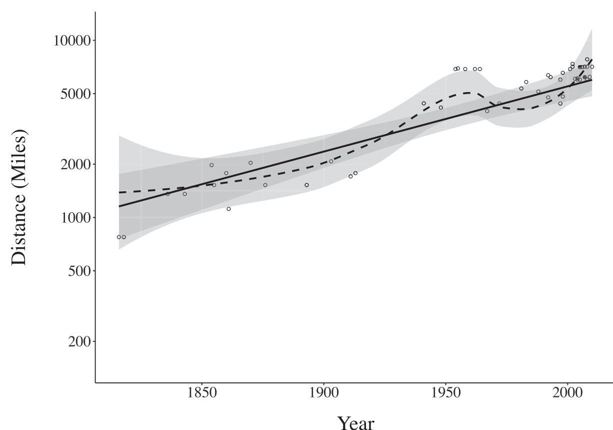

Figure 4. The distance of US uses of force from the US capital (Washington), by year.

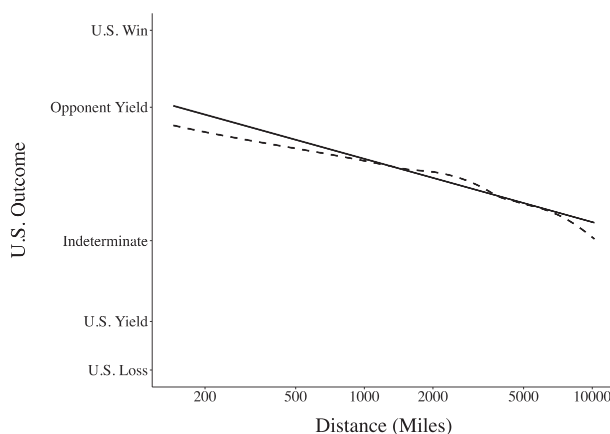

Figure 5. Performance (outcomes) of US MIDs as a function of distance from Washington.

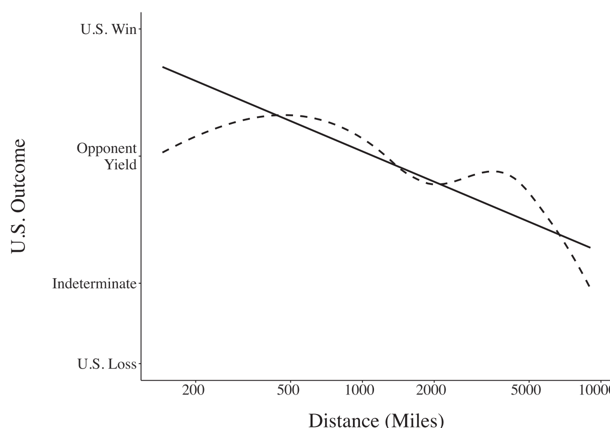

Figure 6. Performance of US uses of force as a function of distance from Washington.

targets from the People's Republic of China due to the close vicinity of China's Hainan Island. Even after the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam in 1973, the Unites States continued to experience military encounters in Southeast Asia, such as the Mayaguez incident of 1975, when forces of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime boarded an American container ship. US uses of force also increased in the Middle East, such as the 1986 airstrikes of Operation El Dorado Canyon against Libyan terrorist bases and Operation Nimble Archer in 1987, when US Navy ships attacked two Iranian oil platforms in retaliation for an Iranian missile attack on a Kuwaiti oil tanker, reflagged as part of efforts to secure Persian Gulf oil supplies. The 1990s saw many uses of force against Iraq as the United States and its allies sought to enforce UN Security Council resolutions in the aftermath of the First Gulf War (Gibler 2018). Northern and Southern no-fly-zones were patrolled during the decade, and President Clinton ordered a series of cruise missile strikes against Iraq between 1993 and 1998 (Gibler 2018). US forces remain engaged throughout the Middle East to this day.

The robust trend in US Wars, MIDs, and uses of force reflects a clear underlying reality: over time, the United States is simply fighting farther from home. Before the end of World War II, US military action took place predominantly in the Western Hemisphere (Braithwaite 2010; Bezerra and Braithwaite 2017). Engagements outside of the Hemisphere tended to be limited to Europe and Northeast Asia, as was the primary focus in the Second World War. After victory in 1945, however, hegemonic power allowed the United States to pursue Cold War objectives and the containment of more distant adversaries. There was an increase in US military presence in the areas surrounding the Soviet Union and a corresponding increase in MIDs in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia (Braithwaite 2010; Bezerra and Braithwaite 2017). As America's focus shifted in the second half of the twentieth century from the Western Hemisphere to Eurasia, the United States found itself fighting at increasingly greater distances from its own territory. Figures 3 and 4 detail this trend, paralleling the data sources and approaches presented earlier in Figures 1 and 2. As time has progressed, America has tended to engage in contests at a greater distance from the continental United States. As with the sample of all militarized disputes, the effect on uses of force is very large. The average distance to a dispute in 1816 in Figure 4 is roughly 1,300 miles. By 2010, this distance had grown to over 7,500 miles. The effects of time on average distance for both MIDs and uses of force are thus very similar.

Proximity and US Military Performance: The Tyranny of Distance

After having reviewed relevant preliminaries, we can finally assess the effects of distance on the contests themselves. Outcomes are coded by the COW and are presented here using an ordered five-point scale ranging from US losses to US victories. While observers can differ in classifying different outcomes (reasonable minds could, for example, classify the Korean War as a US victory for liberating South Korea, a US loss due to the withdrawal from North Korea, or a draw since the thirty-eighth parallel continued to divide the peninsula), we intentionally employ a dataset coded by others to avoid the danger of confirmation bias.

The results of these comparisons appear in Figure 5 (MIDs) and Figure 6 (uses of force). As both figures reveal, declining US military performance at longer distances is primarily driven by indeterminate outcomes, and not by clear losses. Note too the density of MIDs and uses of force taking place far from the United States in some of the furthest places in the world from Washington, DC: The Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Years of interventions, attacks, and conflicts in these regions since the Second World War have resulted in less than optimal outcomes or even in tragedy (e.g., the bombing of the Marine barracks

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Table 1. Effect of distance on outcome (MIDs)

	Dependent variable: MID outcome for United States					
	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*	*(5)*	*(6)*
Year	−0.004***		−0.001	−0.002	−0.002	−0.002
	(0.001)		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Distance		−0.897***	−0.797***	−0.792***	−0.821***	−0.786***
		(0.214)	(0.246)	(0.248)	(0.249)	(0.251)
US CINC				0.581	0.609	0.714
				(1.148)	(1.148)	(1.152)
Relative CINC				0.524	0.501	0.463
				(0.324)	(0.325)	(0.327)
Escalation level					0.019*	0.021*
					(0.011)	(0.011)
Concurrent MIDs						−0.021
						(0.018)
Observations	306	306	306	306	306	306
Log likelihood	−280.7	−275.8	−275.5	−274	−272.4	−271.8
Akaike Information Criterion.	571	562	563	564	563	564
Bayesian Information Criterion	590	580	585	594	596	601

*$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

in Lebanon in 1983, the disastrous US Embassy hostage rescue attempt in Iran in 1980). Note that even when using the center of the continental United States instead of Washington DC, the results remain consistent—and substantially similar results are obtained even when using San Diego, CA. Thus, the results explored below are not sensitive to the selection of any reasonable measurement origin.

As is clear from examining each figure, the performance of the United States military decreases as the location of conflicts is increasingly distant from Washington. The United States does better in conflicts that occur closer to home. The need to move farther away from the United States in order to compete internationally in an era where US interests dominate most nearby nations ensures declining military success. This "globalization" of US military activities is also responsible for the "tyranny of distance" effects detailed in our theoretical argument. Fighting farther from home, the United States does more poorly.

We can further validate these findings using a more sophisticated multivariate modeling approach to predict conflict success. Table 1 models US outcomes in MIDs as a function of various explanatory variables using ordered probit estimation. The first regression (Model 1) again confirms the basic association between time and outcome.

Model 2 notes a similar correlation between distance and outcome. Model 3 shows that year is not a better predictor of outcome than distance—a striking result, given the central role of time in most explanations for declining US military performance. The remaining three regression models in Table 1 address other possible confounding factors: the intensity level of MID hostilities, shifting US power, and concurrent MIDs. Conflict intensity appears to have a positive effect on whether the United States wins or loses disputes; bigger investments in military effort lead to increased US success. The Composite Indicator of National Capabilities (CINC) is an index of six variables (national population, urban population, military spending, military personnel, iron/steel production, energy consumption) that is designed to capture the capacity of a nation to influence or compel other states (Bremer 1980; Singer 1990; Correlates of War Project 2011). It is conceivable that the distance of disputes from the US capital varies in such a way as to confound our results if power, and not proximity, is the real reason for declining American success. The US share of world capabilities appears to have no effect on whether the United States, or its adversary, prevail in military contests. This result may seem counterintuitive, given the definition of power and what is often assumed about its effects (i.e., power is the ability to influence). However, influence usually occurs in the shadow of force. The finding actually makes considerable sense if the effect of the balance of power shapes the kinds of bargains adversaries forge, rather than whether they fight (Gartzke 2012). Being more capable or more willing to escalate can influence the outcome of a fight started at random. But since capabilities so clearly matter for who wins, the obvious effects of material power are seldom acted out in practice.

Regardless, use of these additional checks again shows that distance is a significant determinant of American performance in combat. While we cannot ascertain in this analysis whether distance shapes outcomes through increasing cost, adding uncertainty or diminishing interest, we can confirm that fighting far from home reduces US military success. Table 2 similarly models outcomes, this time for American uses of force. These results are equivalent to those from Table 1, despite the smaller sample size. Distance seems to be confirmed as a critical predictor of military outcomes as it consistently exhibits a negative effect on uses of force. Note also that in both tables the second model—a simple bivariate relationship between distance and outcome—yields the best model fit using either the AIC or BIC of the models. Furthermore, appendix B includes the same two tables but with observations limited to the postwar period. As these additional tests demonstrate, our core findings hold even when looking only at the period since 1945.

Conclusion

The evidence provided here shows that US performance in militarized disputes has decreased over time, as is commonly asserted in public discourse. This is the case regardless of whether one considers all MIDs, or just those disputes involving actual uses of force. There is also substantial evidence that performance decreases with distance, regardless

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Table 2. Effect of distance on outcome (uses of force)

	Dependent variable: Use of force outcome for United States					
	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*	*(5)*	*(6)*
Year	−0.004*		−0.000	−0.001	−0.000	0.000
	(0.002)		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Distance		−1.129***	−1.120***	−1.255***	−1.345***	−1.320***
		(0.313)	(0.351)	(0.365)	(0.390)	(0.394)
US CINC				−2.888	−3.000	−2.906
				(2.014)	(2.024)	(2.036)
Relative CINC				1.350*	1.376*	1.329*
				(0.716)	(0.718)	(0.726)
Escalation level					0.051	0.058
					(0.077)	(0.079)
Concurrent MIDs						−0.012
						(0.026)
Observations	102	102	102	102	102	102
Log likelihood	−104.4	−99.3	−99.3	−96.6	−96.4	−96.3
Akaike Information Criterion	217	207	209	207	209	211
Bayesian Information Criterion	227	217	222	226	230	234

*$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

of time period. We suspect this relationship is due to the tendency for power to decay with distance, a decrease in national interest the farther from home one fights, and the effects of selection without replacement on the range of threats the United States faces around the globe. It has long been recognized that a state's power decreases the farther it fights from its own territory, due to a "loss of strength gradient" (Boulding 1962). A decrease in interests farther abroad, likewise, seems intuitive as humans are less familiar with, or concerned about, distant rather than proximate actors and conditions. Lastly, it is also possible that once a state has defeated existential threats and dealt with issues closer to home, the conflicts that remain are increasingly abstract, ambiguous, and of lesser immediate salience than for previous, more proximate, contests. Together, these three mechanisms could create a "tyranny of distance" that has frustrated the world's sole remaining superpower even during its unipolar moment. Future research will investigate each of these proposed mechanisms and possible interactions between them.

Some might argue that the negative relationship between outcome and distance is unsurprising, given well-established theories like the "loss of strength gradient" (Boulding 1962). We include a standard measure of capabilities to address the effect of power on performance. The impact of distance is thus the effect of proximity, controlling for material capabilities. Others note that the effect of capabilities on conflict performance should most readily be felt on the types of bargains actors accept or reject, regardless of whether fighting occurs or not (Fearon 1995). Sophisticated militaries already understand that their abilities decrease with distance, suggesting that these effects should be "priced in" to contests. The United States, along with its potential adversaries, should be well aware of the effects of the loss of strength gradient. Indeed, this logic suggests that conflict outcomes should be more or less random. If the United States were to overestimate its power projection capabilities, it should be able to update these beliefs after failure and simply not "give battle" to distant adversaries in future disputes. Despite this logic, however, we find a consistent negative relationship between military outcomes and the proximity of the United States to fighting.

It is of course possible that US officials persistently overestimate the nation's prospects for military success. Hubris could come from many sources. American politicians might be ideologically driven, for example, adopting grand strategies that resist negative feedback. Realists such as Barry Posen and John Mearsheimer argue precisely that the United States has pursued a strategy of Liberal Hegemony, leading to conflicts where favorable outcomes are unlikely given an ideology that emphasizes objectives that are remote from US core interests (Posen 2015; Mearsheimer 2018). Given that nearly all of the conflicts that the United States has entered into since the end of the Cold War have been wars of choice (Posen 2015), the decline in US military performance documented here clearly appears to be self-inflicted. Despite the risk of "imperial overstretch" (Kennedy 1989), the United States may consider itself an exception. Porter argues that "American hegemony regards itself as uniquely non-territorial" and that its proponents believe it "transcends geographical limits" (Porter 2015, 25). In his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy promised that "we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe" and only a few years later the United States found itself enmeshed in an unwinnable quagmire in Southeast Asia. Likewise, the 9/11 Commission Report a half century later similarly declared that "the American homeland is the planet" (Porter 2015, 362), just as the United States began its interminable conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, the distinctive American attitude of no-interest-too-far, supported by a group-thinking "Blob" in Washington preventing serious change to US grand strategy (Porter 2018), could explain failure.

The problem with many of these arguments, though, is that they ignore significant variation in time and space. Adoption of the Powell–Weinberger Doctrine, for example, implies a rational, conservative response to an important national setback. Retrenchment occurred, much as one would expect. Subsequent changes to world affairs—the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of America's "unipolar moment"—created an opportunity for a significant expansion in the scope of US activities. The interventionism of Clinton and Albright was not an unreasonable response to

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contemporary conditions. At the same time, it is not clear why ideological or organizational pathologies would necessarily lead to systematic differences in geographical performance. Why would Liberal Hegemons or the Blob necessarily get things more wrong in distant places than in proximate ones? Both President Kennedy and the 9/11 Commission offer models that should presumably do as well, or poorly, wherever they are applied. It, therefore, remains a mystery why America fights conflicts at distances that, statistically, it should be reluctant to initiate. That said, we believe that the most plausible origin of our findings lies in the combination of inferior information about distant places and decreased motivation, in the face of much greater capabilities. Each of these produces a more complex, tenuous setting for forecasting, making it difficult for decision-makers to correctly estimate the balance of capabilities and resolve, and thus increasing the hazard that the United States "errs" its way to war.

Future research will determine scope and scale conditions for the "tyranny of distance" and explore which nations are most, and least, affected by a loss of strength, declining interest, and selection effects in military performance. On the one hand, the "tyranny of distance" should not be unique to the United States, as many of the headwinds we describe are also faced by other states. On the other hand, it is unclear why a well-motivated nation would fail to adjust its expectations, given experience of failure, and thus avoid consistently under-performing at longer distance. If Porter's argument about American exceptionalism and ideological commitment is right, this would suggest that other, more "normal" nations may avoid such behavior.

Finally, it is worth noting that our alternative explanation to the conventional wisdom of a transition from interstate to intrastate conflict as the cause of declining US combat performance (Tierney 2015) is of more than mere academic interest. It is a common belief in Washington, DC today—perhaps best exemplified by the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States—that the United States has, at long last, left the recent focus on civil conflict and transnational terrorism behind and has instead turned national attention toward a renewed period of "great power competition." If a transition from interstate to intrastate conflict was the predominant cause of the decline in US military performance, then such a return to a focus on interstate security would seem to bode well for the prospects of US combat performance in the future. If instead, it is distance—and not simply intrastate conflict—that explains declining US combat performance, then the shift to a focus on great powers will not itself do much to improve US military performance. Indeed, with increasing tensions with Russia and China, as well as North Korea and Iran, it seems likely that the United States will continue to be involved in crises in distant places, far from its shores and as prone to the "tyranny of distance" as ever.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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