

Are You Certain? Leaders, Overprecision, and War

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Overview

Does greater certainty about an opponent's military characteristics cause peace?

- Yes, if warranted, consistent with bargaining models
- No, if unwarranted due to overprecision errors

Certainty's sources condition the consequences.

Overprecision errors are most likely when:

- Estimation process excludes elites who oversee diplomacy
- Leaders have no combat experience

Look to subjects making subjective estimates.

Evidence for the conditional relationship

Measure certainty in an original data set of declassified documents about crises involving the US during the Cold War.

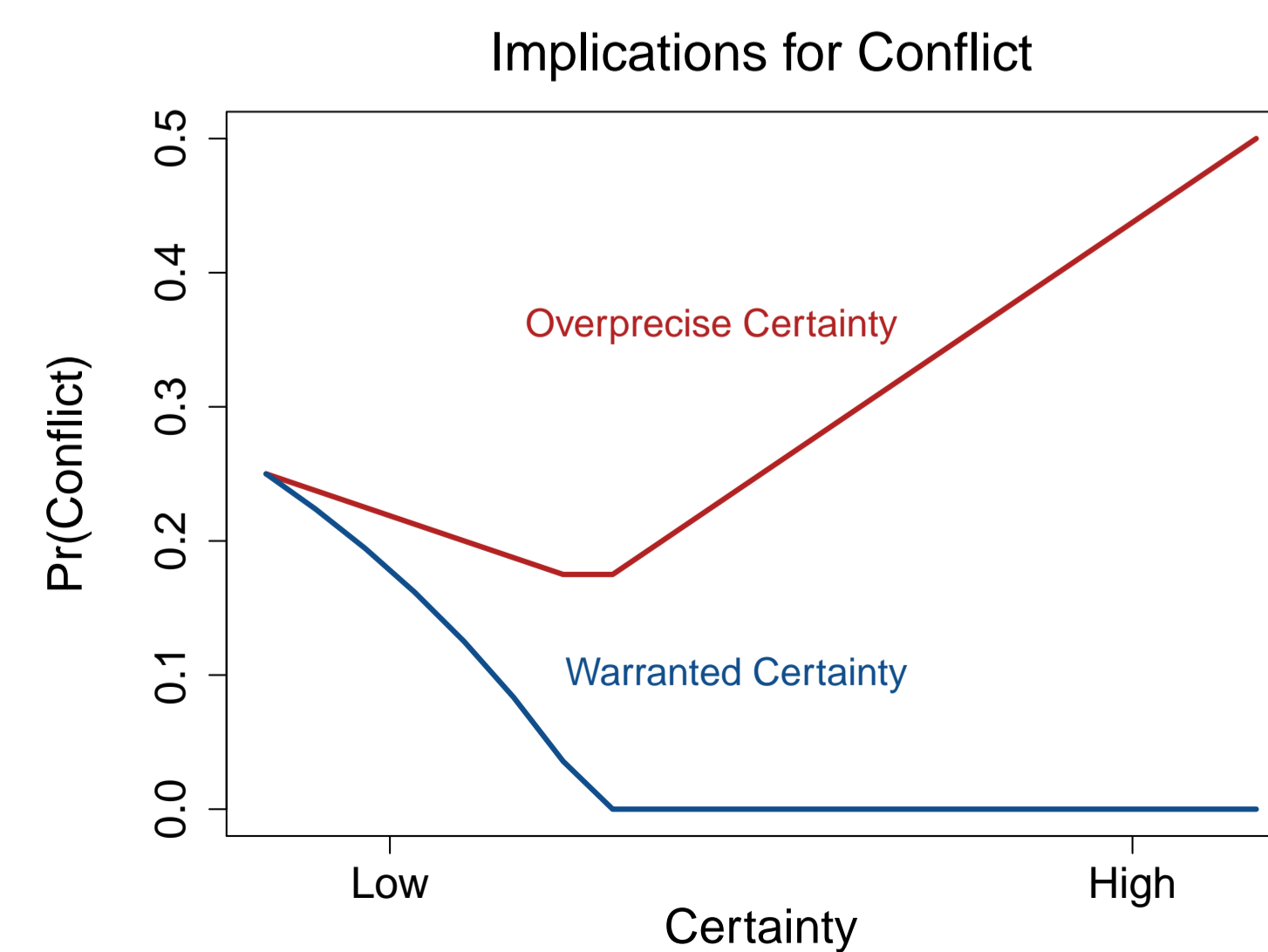
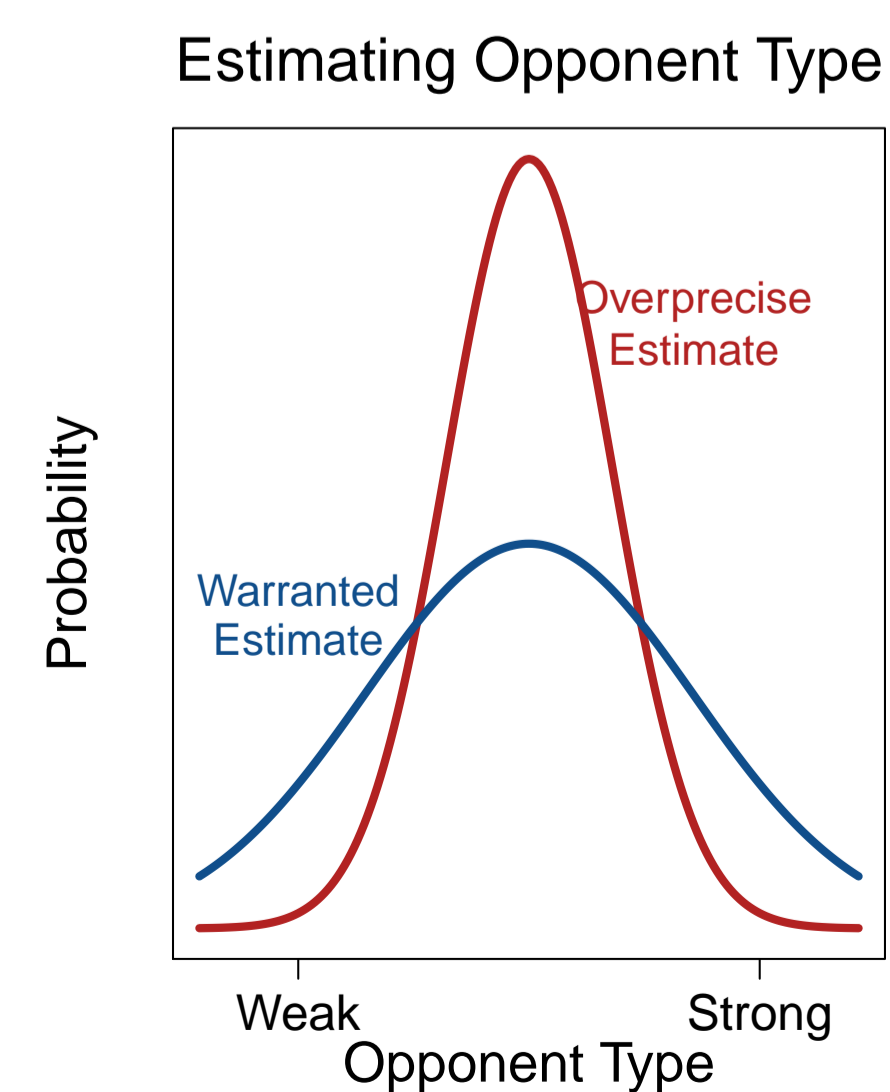
Uncertainty, overprecision, bargaining

Standard bargaining theory of war (purely rationalist)

- Bargaining can fail when uncertain about opponent's type.
- Risk-reward tradeoff leaves positive probability of war.
- **Conflict is decreasing in certainty.**

Bargaining with overprecision errors (partly behavioral)

- “(almost) everyone exhibits overprecision (almost) all the time” —Ortoleva and Snowberg (forthcoming)
- Optimize based on overprecise estimate of opponent's type
- **Conflict can be increasing in certainty.**



Theorizing certainty's conditional effects

H1: State Department officials have less overprecision. State Dept involvement moderates the certainty-conflict relationship.

- assume preference overlap → information transmission
- Why: selection, learn from peers, or information set

H2: Presidents with combat experience have less overprecision, which moderates the certainty-conflict relationship.

- Why: learn that priors are overprecise

Data

Observations: 44 opportunities for US to use force during Eisenhower through Ford administrations

Corpus: Declassified security documents (FRUS)

- private communication: meeting transcripts and memos
- ~ 850 texts; 9 speakers and 2,000 words per observation

Measuring certainty: Dictionary approach (for now)

FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1969–1976
VOLUME XIX, PART 1, KOREA, 1969–1972, DOCUMENT 17

17. Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon¹

Washington, April 18, 1969.

SUBJECT
Alternatives Incident to EC-121 Shootdown
Military Options

If I understand correctly, the alternative military responses being considered against North Korea as retaliation for the EC-121 shoot-down have boiled down to airstrikes against two airfields:

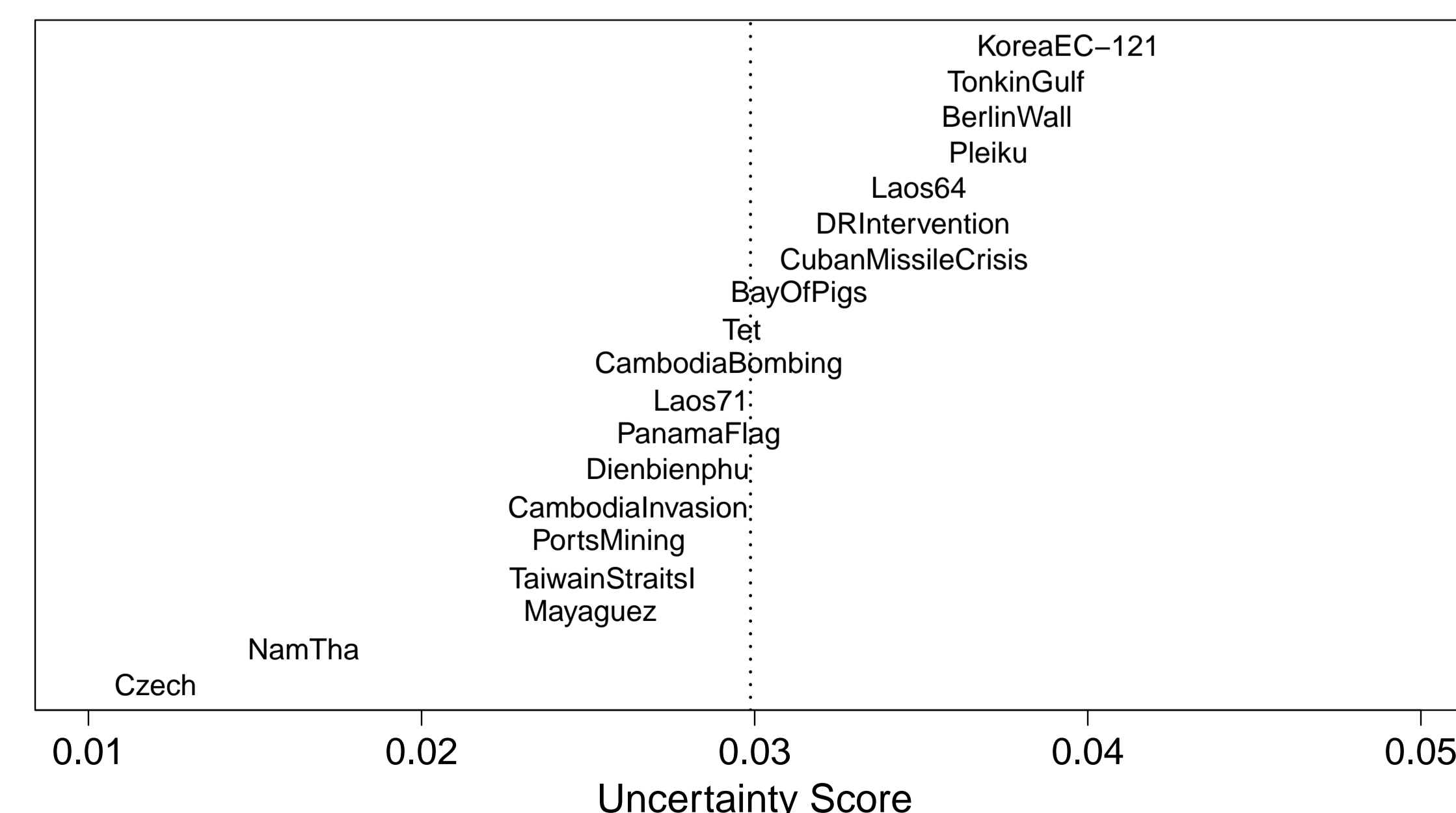
- [less than 1 line not declassified]
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If an attack is carried out, I believe the carrier-based attack strike is preferable for a number of reasons. Among those reasons are that:

- B-52 strikes are synonymous—rightly or wrongly—with massive, indiscriminate bombing. At 30 tons of bombs per B-52, there is some justification for the “massive” impression. A strike involving B-52s could well be less acceptable in the eyes of world opinion, and even possibly U.S. public opinion, than one involving smaller ordnance loads and destruction impact.

- If U.S. losses occur in the strike (and I believe there is more chance they may than the JCS papers indicate), the loss of smaller attack aircraft will be more palatable (in terms of lives and dollars) than the loss of B-52s.

Certainty Across Crises



Design & Findings

Outcome

- Conflict

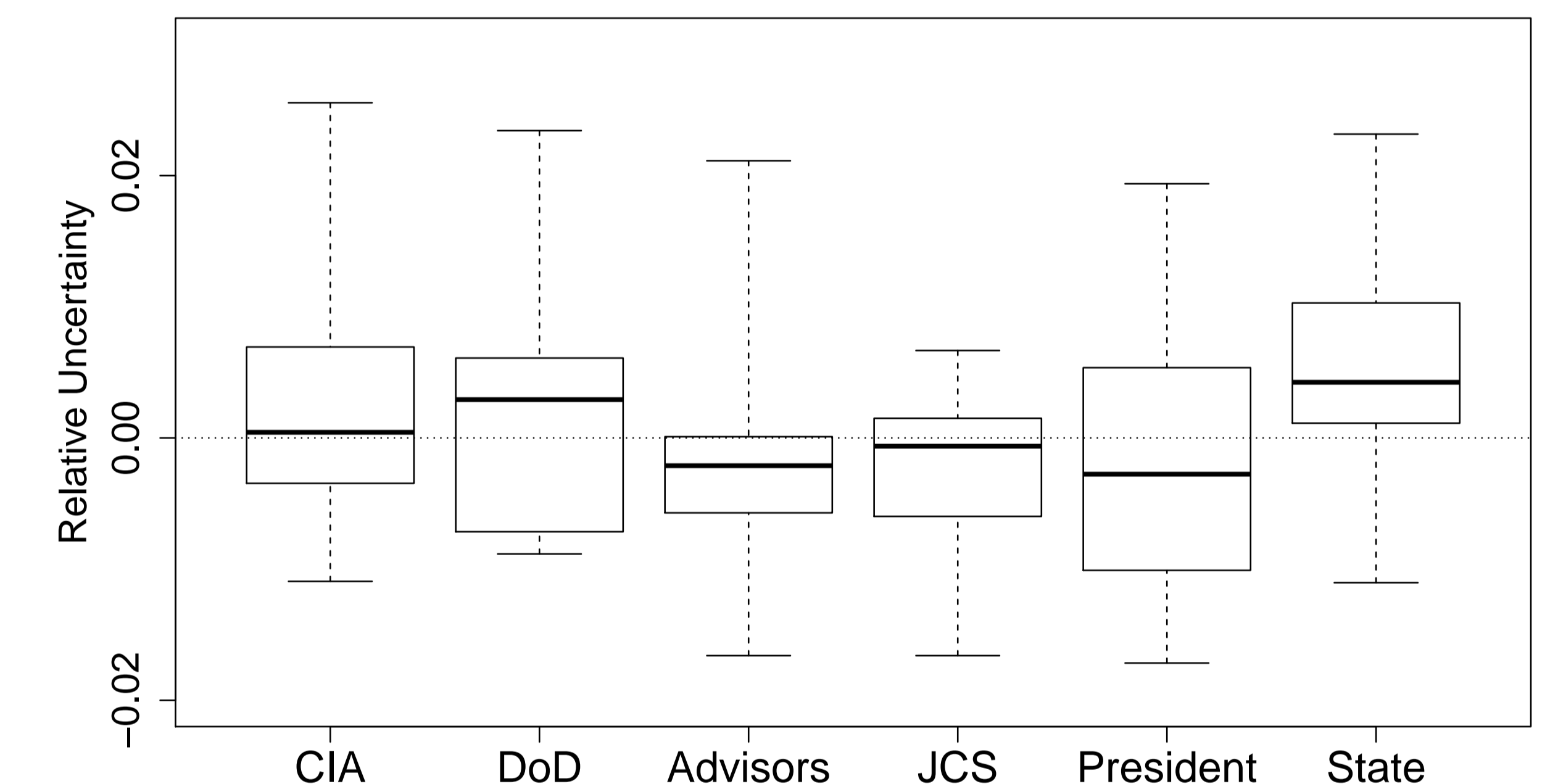
Explanatory

- Interaction of *Uncertainty* and *State Dept Involvement*
- Interaction of *Uncertainty* and *Combat Background*

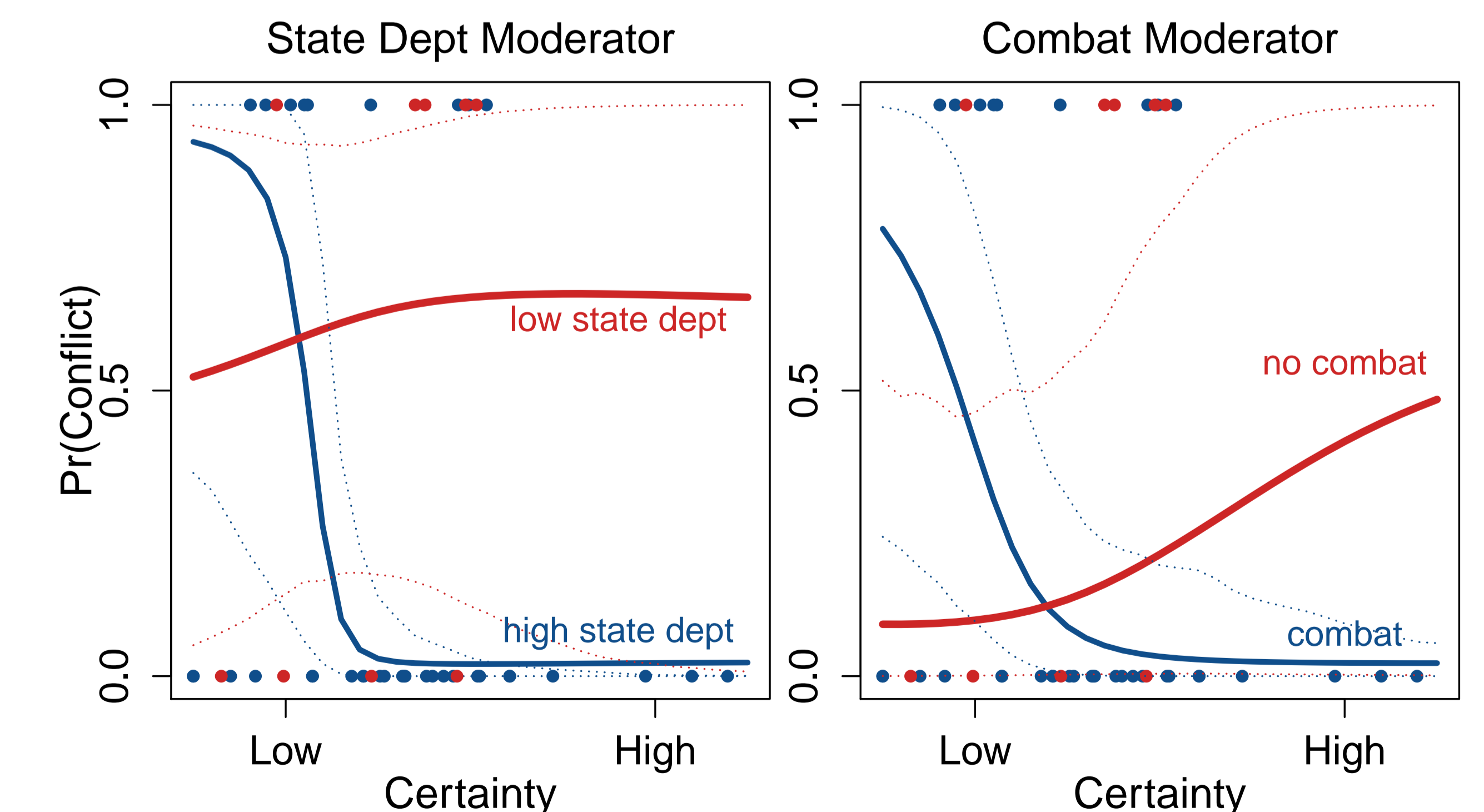
Controls

- *Capabilities, Regime, Proximity, Party, Age, Enemy Type*

Conditional on Crisis, State Department is Relatively Uncertain



Conditional Relationship between Certainty and Conflict



$p < 0.05$ for both interaction terms