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- 1 As Italian elites prepared to attack Ethiopia in 1935 they knew that resolve mattered; they were aware that British willingness to incur costs to defend Ethiopia and the League of Nations would have a decisive impact on the war. If the British were to militarily oppose to Italy or even to close the Suez Canal, the Italian war effort would be prohibitively costly and would probably fail. Moreover, the British sent signals that could have been interpreted as evidence of high resolve (a willingness to incur great costs to defend Ethiopia and the League of Nations). In mid-September Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare made an impassioned pledge that Britain would be “second to none” in defending its League obligations. The British government also repositioned the Home and Mediterranean fleets to be nearer to the potential clash. Some high-ranking Italian officials interpreted these signals as evidence that Britain would incur costs to defend Ethiopia and the League. Despite these signals, however, Fascist Dictator Benito Mussolini perceived low British resolve and rejected the final peace proposals on September 21st. He took Italy to war with Ethiopia on October 3rd, 1935. This article seeks to explain why the Italian government perceived low British willingness to incur costs on the eve of the Ethiopian War in 1935.
- 2 The article offers an explanation of varying assessments of resolve (defined as the willingness to incur costs for a disputed good) that is rooted in neoclassical realist theory. I argue that careerism by key domestic actors and the nature of the defender’s signals can combine to lead to perceptions of low resolve even if evidence of high resolve exists. First, those domestic actors within the challenger’s state, that are personally committed, or “vested” in, foreign policy action against the defender are most likely to question the defender’s signals. In contrast to previous scholarship, however, I do not argue that these vested actors are *blind* to signals of their adversary’s resolve – vested actors are simply more critical judges of incoming signals.¹ The nature of the signals is incredibly important. I argue that challenger governments dominated by vested actors are only likely to perceive high resolve when defenders send clear

(unambiguous) and costly signals. Even highly vested actors look for and perceive clear signals, whereas they are motivated to deemphasize anything less.

- 3 International relations scholars have long recognized the importance of resolve (as defined above) in international security. In deterrence theory, for example, a low-resolve defender will have much more difficulty deterring a challenger than a high-resolve defender.² However, scholars have yet to adequately explain the states' varying perceptions of adversary resolve. This is a problem because, given the nebulous nature of resolve, states often try to signal resolve to an adversary but fail. The history of international security is rife with cases where incorrect assessments of resolve led to much blood spilt that otherwise would not have been.³

Definitions of resolve

- 4 As noted above, I define resolve as the willingness to incur costs, or, as Steven Rosen put it, "the willingness to suffer".⁴ The more willing a state is to incur costs for a particular good, the higher its resolve. By costs, I generally mean lives lost and money spent but costs can be anything the defender values. Rosen cites the famous quote by North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh that "[i]n the end, the Americans will have killed ten of us for every American soldier who died, but it is they who will tire first".⁵ Resolve differs from but is related to capabilities (i.e., the resources states use to get what they want in international relations). Resolve refers to a state's willingness to use these capabilities. A state's resolve is also often related to its probability of action. All things held equal, the more willing a state is to incur costs for a contested good, the more likely it is to act to acquire or defend that good. This is not to say that the two concepts are synonymous. States may have a high willingness to incur costs but a low probability of action because they expect their chances of success to improve in the future.

An Alternative Explanation: Costly Signals

- 5 The signaling approach assumes that the defender's signals are of primary importance in constituting challenger perceptions of defender resolve.⁶ An initial claim is that certain signals convey a high resolve message whereas others do not.⁷ Perhaps the most common signals states send are statements; some directly refer to a willingness to incur costs others refer to the probability of action –often in the form of an "if/then" threat statement or the state's interest in a particular good.⁸ A related step states may take is to formally commit to the defense of a threatened state.⁹ Military action also can signal resolve. When states mobilize forces, move them, or place them in a vulnerable area (so-called "trip-wire forces") they signal resolve.¹⁰ Trip wire forces demonstrate resolve in that they risk an initial sunk cost (lost life) that, if imposed, may require more costs to be incurred.
- 6 Thomas Schelling argued that costly signals are more likely to be heard than "cheap" talk. The defender has to be willing to incur costs while signaling in order to make the case that it will be willing to incur costs to defend the objective.¹¹ James Fearon developed the argument that public commitments are costly because they entail international and domestic audience costs if the defender later chooses not to defend the contested good.¹² Kenneth Schultz has argued that democracies are particularly able to make credible threats because opposition groups serve as an independent

source of information and a check against bluffing.¹³ This is important because, as Robert Jervis has shown, states have an incentive to bluff (i.e., to say that they have higher resolve than is the case). If states convince others that they are more interested in a disputed good than they truly are, they are more likely to win in a dispute.¹⁴

- 7 The primary problem with the costly signaling argument is that it is overly generous in categorizing a signal as costly. Costly signal theorists count even very vague public statements regarding the contested good as signals of high resolve. For example, James Fearon cites David Lloyd George's "Mansion House" speech during the 1911 Agadir crisis between France and Germany over Morocco, as an example of a costly signal.¹⁵ It is important to recognize that in the relevant portion of the Mansion House speech Lloyd George did not even mention Morocco or Germany, instead stating,

[...] if a situation were to be forced upon us in which peace could only be preserved by the surrender of the great and beneficent position Britain has won by centuries of heroism and achievement, by allowing Britain to be treated, where her interests were vitally affected, as if she were of no account in the Cabinet of nations, then I say emphatically that peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great country like ours to endure.¹⁶

- 8 Under what circumstances does this statement commit Britain to use force and against whom? Exactly, what outcome would lead to the surrender of Britain's position? If a clear answer to that question cannot be offered, how can the politician making it be held accountable for backing down later?

A Neoclassical Realist Explanation of Failed Attempts to Signal Resolve

- 9 My argument is rooted in the neoclassical realist approach to explaining foreign policy. Neoclassical realism agrees with the general realist emphasis on the importance of power and conflict in international politics but also uses domestic and individual-level factors to explain the complex ways in which power and conflict are manifest in foreign policy outcomes.¹⁷ This project is neoclassical realist because of the object of study and the way I am studying it. In exploring how a potential challenger perceives a defender's willingness to incur costs, I am focusing on state perceptions of *relevant* power –that is, how much power a state is willing to use in a particular context. The argument that follows is also neoclassical realist because it integrates factors from the domestic and international levels of analysis to explain perceptions of resolve.
- 10 My argument focuses on the interaction of two factors: vested actors and clear signals. I begin by noting that domestic actors have varying levels of motivation to process information on adversary resolve: it is essential to distinguish between what I call interested and vested actors. I argue that actors are primarily driven to maximize their career opportunities. As such, not all members of a bureaucracy that stands to gain from war would favor it, as prior scholarship has suggested.¹⁸ This is because the individual's career gains from successful challenge are not so great as to make the individual blind to the negative ramifications of policy failure. For example, a general would stand to gain in career terms from a successful war. The same general, however, would be concerned with his reputation as an analyst if his country were to be defeated in war because he underestimated adversary resolve. While we can expect an interested actor –one employed by a bureaucracy that may gain from successful challenge– to view evidence of high defender resolve with skepticism, it also makes sense to expect

that skepticism to have limits given the costs of underestimating resolve (i.e., the devastation that can come with a lost war).

- 11 Vested actors also often play a role in international crises. Vested actors are born when an individual repeatedly advocates for a challenge to the *status quo* that could result in war.¹⁹ The advocate for challenge makes internal appeals to persuade government colleagues and makes public appeals to national and international audiences. In so doing, the actor becomes vested in the aggressive policy in a fundamental sense –his or her personal fortune becomes intertwined with the policy. A successful challenge will entail personal, career success whereas the absence of challenge or failed challenge attempt will entail personal failure. Motivated bias provides the link between domestic actors' preferences and perceptions of resolve. Research in psychology tells us that people dislike value trade-offs. As a result, people often ignore or discount information that would confront them with the reality of a value trade-off.²⁰ For example, actors with an interest in an aggressive policy stance would be expected to discount or ignore information of high adversary resolve, as such information would force a value trade-off between the desire for the benefits of challenge and the painful reality that challenge is unlikely to succeed.²¹ The motivated bias trade-off discussed above is more severe for the vested actor than it is for the merely interested actor. If the vested actor is forced to recognize that the defender has high resolve she/he will either have to endorse retreat from the advocated policy or face likely failure in that policy. Wallace Thies offered a similar logic to make sense of the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy:

[...] Since a decision to yield in the face of coercive pressures must often be made by the very officials who argued (often long and hard) for going ahead with whatever action brought on the coercive pressures [...] the decision to yield is one that may be fraught with peril for the careers and at times the lives of the officials who must make it [...].²²

- 12 Consequently, vested actors are highly critical of signs of high defender resolve and if they dominate the challenger's government, this means a perception of low resolve is likely. Even these actors usually recognize, however, that an attempt at challenge that ends in a disastrous national defeat is worse for them than policy retreat. Vested actors are highly critical; they are rarely blind. To illustrate: British Prime Minister Anthony Eden was a leading advocate, in public and private, for the use of force against Egypt in 1956. He did alter his initial perception of low American resolve, however, when the U.S. took action at the International Monetary Fund that put severe pressure on Britain, making American resolve clear.²³ Because vested actors have a motivation for being critical we expect only the clearest signals of defender resolve to get through to them.
- 13 The more ambiguous the signal is, the less likely it is to lead to a perception of high resolve.²⁴ As Snyder and Diesing put it "[m]aximum explicitness and clarity in threats tends to produce maximum credibility."²⁵ Clarity in public statements entails that the defender specify the exact nature of the steps it will take (i.e., the costs it is willing to incur) if the challenger violates the *status quo*. Defenders act with clarity when costly action can only be interpreted as a contribution to the defense of the disputed good; ambiguous action can be interpreted in ways that have nothing to do with resolve signaling.
- 14 Defenders may have incentives to be less than clear. The more ambiguous a signal is the more able government officials are to evade the costs associated with having one's bluff

called.²⁶ As Thomas Schelling wrote “[t]o say one may act is to say that one may not, and to say this is to confess that one has kept the power of decision [...]”²⁷ Clear signals of high resolve always entail costs to a sender if it backs down. It is reasonable, moreover, for skeptical challengers to see ambiguous signals as indicators of low resolve. If the defender was willing to incur costs, the challenger reasons, it would have sent a clear signal.²⁸ In sum, a defender is most likely to convince a challenger of high resolve when it makes a public statement that unambiguously commits it to incur costs to defend the contested good or takes action that can only be interpreted as contributing to the defense of that good.

- 15 A combination of the vested-actor argument and the clear-signal argument provides an explanation of failed attempts to signal resolve (see Table 1). Vested actors are the most critical interpreters of adversary signals. If vested actors dominate the domestic decision making process, the state is unlikely to perceive high resolve in the absence of clear signals. If, however, the defender sends clear signals of high resolve, even governments dominated by vested actors are expected to perceive high resolve. If interested actors dominate, public ambiguous signals should be sufficient to generate challenger perceptions of high resolve. In other words, the signaling threshold is higher for vested actors than interested ones.

Table 1. Vested Actors, Clear Signals, and Perceptions of Defender Resolve

	Vested Actors	Interested Actors
Clear	High	High
Public but Ambiguous	Low	High
Neither	Low	Low

Methods and Case Selection

- 16 In this case study I will use congruence procedure and process tracing methods.²⁹ My aim in using both of these methods will be to assess the fit of the explanations outlined above to this case study as a theory-building exercise and an initial evaluation of the arguments.³⁰ This case is remarkable because Mussolini, at the helm of the Italian government, perceived low resolve *despite* British signals that many interpreted as indicating high resolve. There is also a detailed empirical record of British signaling and Italian elite perceptions as recorded by multiple elites within the British and Italian governments in informal (e.g., diaries and memoirs) and formal (e.g., dispatches reprinted in published primary source collections) manifestations.³¹ Finally, in this case an alternative theory provides contradictory claims.³² The audience costs theory clearly predicts perceptions of high resolve in this case as public signals were sent and the British government was a democracy.

Explaining Italian Perceptions of British Resolve on Ethiopia in 1935

- 17 In this case study resolve refers to a British willingness to incur the costs that a closure of the Suez Canal or military action against Italy would have entailed.³³ British resolve was crucial to Italian policy in this case. First, Italian elites recognized that British military intervention would have devastating military consequences on Italy's war effort.³⁴ In January 1935, Domenico Cavagnari, Chief of Staff of the Italian Navy, suggested that prior to the conflict Mussolini should "believe himself able to exclude the step, that would have grave consequences, of the closure of the Suez Canal, relative to the passage of our armed forces."³⁵ Second, perceptions of low British resolve were seen as a necessary prerequisite for Italian attack.³⁶ As high-ranking Italian diplomat, Raffaele Guariglia explained that it was "[i]mpossible to do it against France and Britain, indispensable to do it in agreement with them."³⁷
- 18 The following narrative reveals that while the British sent some signals of moderate to high resolve from December 1934 to September 1935, none were costly. In mid-September 1935 the British sent two costly signals of high resolve and most Italian elites began to perceive high British resolve. Mussolini continued to perceive British resolve as low, however, and ultimately chose to refuse the final peace proposals in late September. Analysis of the alternative explanations follows the narrative.

From Walwal to Stresa

- 19 On December 5th, 1934, fighting erupted between an Ethiopian force camped at Walwal and Italian troops that occupied the area, claiming it was a part of Italian Somaliland.³⁸ Italy claimed its forces had been attacked but its initial demands on Ethiopia were limited; they included a formal Ethiopian apology, recognition of Italy's right to occupy Walwal, and financial compensation.³⁹ The British and French were successful in getting Ethiopia to pursue the dispute through bilateral arbitration - not the League of Nations as Ethiopia preferred.⁴⁰ Britain, it seemed, did not want to damage the League by exposing it to a dispute that the League was not capable of resolving.⁴¹ Britain's initial action hardly signaled high resolve.
- 20 Italian decision makers appear to have initially expected a low British willingness to incur costs to defend Ethiopia.⁴² Past British agreements with Italy on Ethiopia seemed to signal a lack of British interests and in the eyes of some a free hand for Italy.⁴³ In an important directive to General Pietro Badoglio, chief of the Italian general staff, on December 30th, 1934, Mussolini said that Italy need not worry about Britain or France intervening as long as their interests were recognized.⁴⁴ Undersecretary of the Italian Foreign Ministry Fulvio Suvich recognized British interests in the League and the region but also did not predict Britain would take military action.⁴⁵ In late January, Italy's government, still perceiving low British resolve, extended an informal invitation for future talks with Britain on East Africa.⁴⁶ Britain's failure to respond to this initiative led some in Italy to believe London was uninterested in Italian action against Ethiopia.⁴⁷
- 21 Italian preparations for war in Ethiopia began in the summer of 1934.⁴⁸ The British responded to Italy's preparations with mild protest, seemingly convinced by Italian

assertions that the build-up was intended to defend Italian colonies from Ethiopia.⁴⁹ In his aforementioned directive to Badoglio, Mussolini made it clear that Italy would henceforth look to resolve the Ethiopian problem by force.⁵⁰ Within a month the Italian representative at the League, Pompeo Aloisi, referred to Mussolini's decision to use force as "irrevocable."⁵¹ On February 11th, Mussolini ordered general mobilization, which he justified by the Ethiopian menace and the weakness of Italian forces in the region.⁵² While the British did not know about the Badoglio directive, they did know about the mobilization.⁵³ Robert Vansittart, Britain's Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, warned Ambassador Grandi on February 27th that war in Ethiopia would be met with hostility from the British public and the unity of Britain, France, and Italy would be threatened.⁵⁴ This was the first signal that Britain might be willing to incur costs in defense of the League and Ethiopia, but as it was private it cannot be considered costly.

- 22 The Stresa conference of April 11-14, 1935, was ostensibly designed to promote cooperation by Italy, France, and Britain against rising German threat. However, the Ethiopian crisis did loom in the background. While Grandi convinced the British Foreign Office to send a North African specialist to Stresa, the British government prohibited him from discussing major issues of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict.⁵⁵ In the informal conversations that resulted the British expert heard that Italy could not exclude the use of force as a means to resolve the dispute.⁵⁶ The British representative replied that Italy could not expect cooperation from Britain and that such a policy "might well react adversely upon Anglo-Italian relations."⁵⁷ Mussolini claimed a victory in that the final declaration, which noted that the three countries would work together to preserve the peace, only referred to Europe.⁵⁸ Britain did not seem to signal a high willingness to incur costs at Stresa; a dispatch from a leading Italian diplomat at Stresa stated that "Great Britain does not appear disposed at this point to assume a precise attitude."⁵⁹

From Stresa to the Three-Power Talks

- 23 The day after the Stresa conference ended, Ethiopia tried, yet again, to get the League to formally address its dispute with Italy. The British government used the opportunity to demand that both sides be prepared to begin arbitration by May.⁶⁰ This seemingly minor diplomatic move was important as the first public British effort in support for Ethiopia and a non-violent solution to the dispute. Some among Italy's elite took the April 15th League *démarche* as a sign of British resolve.⁶¹ In this context, Guariglia and Grandi led a charge to probe the British in an effort to clarify London's position.⁶²
- 24 In meeting with Grandi, Vansittart began by recognizing that military preparations underway meant that "Italy wants to put her hand on Abyssinia". He also noted that "English public opinion would be decidedly against Italy"; and that the government would have to listen to the public.⁶³ Vansittart went on to stress the importance of the League of Nations in keeping Britain committed to Western Europe and stated that the government would "[...] do everything to demonstrate the efficacy of the Genevan institution to the restive British opinion in the case of an Italo-Ethiopian conflict."⁶⁴ The British offered similar signals when Grandi met with Vansittart and Simon in early May.⁶⁵ In the wake of these two probes Mussolini remained unconvinced of high British

resolve. He claimed that if forced to make a choice between Italy and the League, Britain would choose Italy.⁶⁶

- 25 As Italian elites perceived low British resolve, they began making clear that Italy would use force in Ethiopia.⁶⁷ The amount of Italian troops and materiel in Ethiopia also allowed Italian diplomats to make the case that Italy could not concede now because Italian prestige would suffer.⁶⁸ Moreover, in the wake of British pressure at the League, Mussolini began to commit himself publicly to a course of conflict. In a May 14th declaration to the Italian Senate, he warned that “[...] we will send all the soldiers necessary and no one should assume the intolerable arbitrary power to interject with regard to the character and the quantity of our precautionary measures.”⁶⁹ Mussolini was becoming publicly committed to the use of force against Ethiopia.
- 26 About this time, Britain’s private warnings began to entail harsher language. On May 21th, Eric Drummond, Britain’s Ambassador to Rome, told Mussolini privately that an Italian war on Ethiopia “might have the *gravest* results on the League and on the relations between our two countries and on security.”⁷⁰ As the tension mounted, on May 25th, the British-led League’s Council passed resolutions forcing the parties to appoint a tie-breaking fifth arbitrator and mandating that the Council would take up the dispute if the parties failed to address it by August 25th.⁷¹ Undeterred, Mussolini approved mobilization of three additional divisions at the end of May.⁷² When the Italian dictator rejected a June peace offer that Anthony Eden, Lord Privy Seal, had personally delivered to Rome, Eden offered a similarly worded warning.⁷³ Some Italian elites interpreted British action as hostility toward Italy rooted in British colonial interests.⁷⁴
- 27 On June 18, the British foreign office received the secret report of a special commission, tasked with evaluating the country’s interests in Ethiopia.⁷⁵ The “Maffey Report” argued that British interests in Ethiopia did not necessitate military action to preserve the *status quo* but the authors admitted that they had not considered related British interests, such as the integrity of the League, in making their assessment.⁷⁶ The Italian government acquired a copy of the report soon after its release.⁷⁷ On June 27, the results of the British Peace Ballot, an unofficial national plebiscite on the League of Nations, became available. Of those voting 94% approved of non-military measures against an aggressor violating the League’s covenant and 59% supported military sanctions for a violator.⁷⁸
- 28 Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare’s “double policy,” which sought a negotiated solution while supporting collective action, produced mixed Italian perceptions of British resolve.⁷⁹ On July 6th, Mussolini proclaimed to Italian troops that “[...] we are involved in a struggle of decisive importance and that we are immovably decided to follow it through to the end.”⁸⁰ With statements like this one the *Duce* was becoming increasingly vested in an attack on Ethiopia and he would be increasingly resistant to signals of high British resolve. League of Nations ambassador Aloisi was more pessimistic. Reflecting on Eden’s June mission to Rome, he commented that Britain “puts itself on the path of war.”⁸¹ On July 11th, Hoare went so far as to publicly refute rumors that Britain and France were discussing a blockade of Italy.⁸² Italian elites breathed a sigh of relief.⁸³ On July 20th, Aloisi wrote that Mussolini was “more firm than ever in the objectives that he proposes to achieve in Abyssinia.”⁸⁴ The Italian dictator continued to pledge himself publicly to action. On the same day in an interview with the French paper *Echo de Paris*, Mussolini replied to a question about public support for

his aims in Ethiopia that “[a]lmost the whole nation has grasped that which I want and why I want it. She [the nation] has an effort to make, after which she will have her place in the world.”⁸⁵

- 29 In the second half of July France and Britain issued warnings to Italy, noting Italian commitments and the importance of the League for French and British security.⁸⁶ On July 29th, the Foreign Office sent a memo that outlined its interests in opposing Mussolini to Laval, who passed it along to the Italians.⁸⁷ The next day, Aloisi wrote of the memo “[i]t completely clarifies the intention of the English cabinet in our regard. London, which treats us like we are crazy, is anxious for the League of Nations, for its colonial empire and will prevent us from waging war *at all costs*.”⁸⁸ Aloisi failed to note, however, that the British memo made no mention of what Britain should actually *do* if Italy attacked Ethiopia. Mussolini responded to the British memo by committing even more firmly to war. On July 31th, the *Duce* used the newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia* to commit his regime; he proclaimed that “[t]he solution of the problem must be total. [...] The problem admits of only one solution –with Geneva, without Geneva, against Geneva.”⁸⁹ As he vested himself and his regime in the future war he would be reluctant to accept all but the clearest evidence that the war would fail due to British resistance.

From the Tripartite Talks to War

- 30 Some decision makers in Italy became concerned that British resolve was higher than had been previously thought.⁹⁰ In talks with Grandi, Vansittart emphasized that an Italian attack on Ethiopia would deal the League a “mortal blow.”⁹¹ Grandi continued to predict that Britain’s bite would be less savage than its bark.⁹² Mussolini, while continuing to make bold statements, ordered chief of staff Badoglio to study how Italy would cope with a military clash with Britain on August 9th.⁹³ Badoglio’s study reported on August 14th that Italy would be at a severe disadvantage vis-à-vis Britain, referring to Italy’s situation as “by far the most difficult that our country has ever passed through.”⁹⁴ The next day Grandi advised Mussolini to “*tirare diritto*” (continue ahead): Grandi expected Britain would take no military action against Italy as the British military had recently reported to its cabinet that they could not guarantee success against Italy.⁹⁵ The British government became concerned with avoiding an Italian attack on the British fleet, referred to as a “mad-dog” act.⁹⁶ In the last week of August, Grandi reported that the British cabinet had decided to defend the League but only through collective action and in full cooperation with the French, which meant it was unlikely to occur.⁹⁷
- 31 Other Italian elites were increasingly convinced that British resolve was higher than Mussolini believed. On August 20th, a group of senators along with Pietro Badoglio met to discuss approaching Italy’s king, Victor Emmanuel II, to restrain Mussolini’s rush to war.⁹⁸ Mussolini’s behavior demonstrates that he was not impervious to perceptions of growing British resolve. The next day Mussolini wrote to General De Bono, telling him that in the case of “grave complications” with Britain he would receive special orders.⁹⁹ At the same time Mussolini continued to publicly commit himself to action. In an August 28th speech to Italian troops, he condemned “absurd and provocative” talk of sanctions and stated defiantly that Italy would “take the nation’s armed forces to the highest possible level.”¹⁰⁰ Badoglio wrote to Mussolini in early September, warning of the British navy’s “crushing superiority” over Italy’s fleet and pleading with him to

reconsider.¹⁰¹ On September 5th, Mussolini instructed Grandi to convince the Foreign Office that Italy would work to avoid a clash with Britain.¹⁰²

- 32 Shortly thereafter, two British moves led many Italian elites to reassess their perceptions of British resolve.¹⁰³ On September 11th, Samuel Hoare, addressing the League of Nations, passionately proclaimed the importance of the League and promised that Britain would be “second to none” in fulfilling its commitment.¹⁰⁴ Most –in Italy and in the rest of the international community– interpreted Hoare’s public speech as a strong sign of British resolve.¹⁰⁵ Those who held this interpretation failed to note that Hoare pledged that Britain would support action led by others. At about the same time it became public knowledge that Britain had moved its Mediterranean fleet from Malta to Alexandria.¹⁰⁶ While the British may have been motivated by a desire to deter attack on Ethiopia it was as plausible that they sought to deter a “mad-dog” Italian attack on Britain’s Mediterranean fleet.¹⁰⁷ On September 14th, Italian elites became aware that the British representative in Addis Ababa had privately pledged that Britain would prevent Italian action against Ethiopia.¹⁰⁸ According to historian George Baer, these events “gave rise to the greatest concern Italian officials had felt so far.”¹⁰⁹ This sentiment among Italian officials contrasted with Mussolini’s steady stream of threats and claims that war was inevitable.¹¹⁰ In an interview with the French journal *Matin* on September 15th the Fascist dictator emphatically stated that “[t]his is not a game of poker [...]. [W]e shall go straight ahead.”¹¹¹ Mussolini seemed to prefer the low resolve interpretation of these signals as neither of them definitively committed Britain to Ethiopia’s defense.¹¹²
- 33 In this climate, in which many Italians perceived high British resolve, a special committee of the League proposed a peace plan in which the League would oversee reform of Ethiopia and France and Britain would work for territorial adjustments between Ethiopia and Italy.¹¹³ In the next few days, Grandi reported from London that Britain might respond to an Italian attack with force and Aloisi urged Mussolini to accept the proposals, which he believed could be modified to achieve Italy’s aims.¹¹⁴ Under this pressure Mussolini proposed on September 18th that Britain and France promise not to apply military sanctions in return for a promise that Italy would not attack the British navy and that it would withdraw two divisions in Libya.¹¹⁵ The *Duce* was clearly probing for indicators of resolve –the British realized this was the case and hoped to keep Mussolini guessing.¹¹⁶ On September 20th, Drummond reported to Mussolini that Britain was making additional naval reinforcements and had redeployed a portion of the home fleet to the Mediterranean.¹¹⁷ Mussolini ignored his advisors and rejected the final peace proposal in the early hours of September 21th.¹¹⁸ Italian troops invaded Ethiopia on October 3rd, 1935.¹¹⁹ Mussolini provided himself with an important escape hatch if his initial assessment was wrong. Italy’s war plan entailed an initial advance –of a few hundred miles– and then a pause to “await events on the international plane.”¹²⁰

Explanations of Italian Perceptions

- 34 The signaling explanation outlined above expected costly signals to lead to perceptions of high resolve. A few public signals did lead many Italian policymakers to adjust their perceptions of British resolve. Hoare’s September 11th speech and the mid-September fleet movements caused many Italian policymakers to fear British intervention. The impact of these two signals, one a public speech with high domestic and international

audience costs and the other a public form of military action provides support for the argument that costly signals matter more than those made in private. The British had been sending private signals expressing their concern with a looming Italo-Ethiopian war all summer with no effect. There is a significant problem with the costly signals explanation, however. Despite the costly September signals and the perceptions of many elites that resolve was high, Mussolini continued to perceive Britain as having low resolve and he rejected the final League proposal on September 2th. Another major problem with this explanation is that it cannot explain why Mussolini perceived the September signals differently than other Italian officials, who urged him to accept the final proposal. Why did they, having seen the same signals, perceive them differently?

Table 2. Vested Actors, Clear Signals, and the Italo-Ethiopian War

	Vested Actors	Interested Actors
Clear	High	High
Public but Ambiguous	Low Italy-September 1935	High (Italian officials except Mussolini by September 1935)
Neither	Low Italy-April 1935	Low

- 35 The vested actors and clear signals explanation predicts the correct outcome and makes sense of the causal process that led to it (see Table 2). A thorough explanation of this case needs to explain why Mussolini did not perceive the September signals as indicators of high resolve while others did. Mussolini repeatedly and publicly committed himself and his regime to military action against Ethiopia. In fact, he had far more frequently and vehemently spoken in favor of action than any other government official in public or private. As early as February 1935, the Italian representative to the League of Nations, Pompeo Aloisi, referred to Mussolini's decision to use force as one that "implicates the future of the regime."¹²¹ For the *Duce* to have accepted a negotiated settlement because Italy faced a high British willingness to incur costs would have been a major blow to his career.¹²² In reporting on the Italian dictator's apparent *sang froid* in the face of the September signals, British ambassador Drummond noted that "Signor Mussolini realises that *his own position is at stake* in an adventure which can only be justified by success."¹²³ Because he was so personally vested in the conflict, it made good sense for the *Duce* to view signals of British resolve with extreme skepticism. Anything other than a clear public signal of resolve would not convince him that the British were willing to incur costs to defend Ethiopia and the League.
- 36 Why was Mussolini not convinced by the Hoare speech and the fleet movement? The September signals were public and costly but not sufficiently clear to lead to perceptions of high resolve. British signals were ultimately evaluated relative to the signals that might have been sent. If the British had a high willingness to incur costs to defend Ethiopia and the League, it was reasonable to ask, why did they not publicly and explicitly threaten military action if Italy attacked Ethiopia? Both the mid-September signals could be interpreted as half measures and it seems that Mussolini interpreted

them this way. In fact, on two occasions in August Grandi commented on the absence of any direct reference to “real and true” sanctions and that many in Britain urged the government to “do something” without reference to explicitly what it should do.¹²⁴ On September 3rd, Grandi noted to Hoare that “amidst the public clamour for sanctions in the British press and on the British platform, the British Foreign Secretary had never so much as mentioned the dangerous word.”¹²⁵ Because he was vested in using force against Ethiopia Mussolini was motivated to look skeptically at the September signals and to see them as signs of low British resolve.

Conclusion

- 37 This article has offered a novel explanation of varying perceptions of resolve. It argued that we must look at vested actors and clear signals to make sense of why states sometimes perceive others’ resolve as high. First, the article made the case that actors who are vested –through repeated public advocacy– in a particular policy path will be especially skeptical of signals of adversary resolve as they seek to avoid value trade-offs. Second, the article argued that the more ambiguity that is present in resolve signals, the less likely states are to perceive others’ resolve as high. The article pointed out that vested actors are especially likely to be skeptical of ambiguous signals. It differed from previous scholarship, however, in arguing that vested actors can be convinced of high adversary resolve by clear and costly signals.
- 38 The article used this theoretical approach to explain Italian perceptions of British resolve on the eve of Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. In September 1935, the British government went from mostly private warnings to two noteworthy public signals: they moved a portion of their home fleet to the Mediterranean and Secretary Hoare pledged that Britain would be “second to none” in defending its League commitment. Many Italian officials reacted to these signals by upgrading their view of British resolve. Benito Mussolini did not. The article concludes that because Mussolini was so vested in war with Ethiopia he was motivated to note ambiguity in the signals that other Italian officials overlooked.
- 39 Some policy recommendations flow from the article’s conclusions. States seeking to convince others of their resolve should first note whether their adversary’s government contains powerful individuals who are vested in action. If not, public but somewhat ambiguous signals should result in perceptions of high resolve. If, however, the adversary contains vested actors, only unambiguous signals will suffice. When faced with vested actors, signaling states are forced to make their willingness to incur costs known.

NOTES

1. Richard Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crises*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 277.

2. Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966, p. 94.
3. See, for example, Richard Lebow, "Miscalculation in the South Atlantic", in Robert Jervis, Richard Lebow and Janice Stein (eds.), *Psychology and Deterrence*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, p. 110.
4. Steven Rosen, "War Power and the Willingness to Suffer", in Bruce Russett (ed.), *Peace, War, and Numbers*, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1972, p. 167-183.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
6. Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, *op. cit.*, p. 136, fn. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
8. Paul Huth, *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 43-44.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6, 34, 48 and 125.
11. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 187.
12. James Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes", *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 88, n° 3, September 1994, p. 577-592.
13. Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 9 and 18. For partisan limits on bluffing resolve in a democracy see Jason Davidson, "Whatever it Takes? Party Image, Probability, and Bluffing Resolve in Kosovo and Iraq", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 29, n° 3, December 2008, p. 411-433.
14. Robert Jervis, "Bargaining and Bargaining Tactics", in Roland Pennock and John Chapman (eds.), *Coercion. Nomos XIV*, Chicago, Aldine-Atherton, 1972.
15. James Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences...", *art. cit.*, p. 582.
16. Reprinted in Edward Grey, *Twenty-five years, 1892-1916*, New York, Frederick A. Stokes, 1925, vol. I, p. 216.
17. Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy", *World Politics*, vol. 51, October 1998, p. 144-172.
18. Ned Lebow, *Between Peace...*, *op. cit.*, p. 222.
19. The notion of vested actors is somewhat similar to the notion of policy entrepreneurs. See John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, New York, Longman, 2nd ed., 2003, p. 122-124, 179-182.
20. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 128-142.
21. Ned Lebow, *Between Peace...*, *op. cit.*, p. 272.
22. Wallace Ties, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict 1964-1968*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, p. 13.
23. Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain's End of Empire in the Middle East*, London, I. B. Taurus, 2003, p. 136-137, 163-164 and 465.
24. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, *op. cit.*, p. 40 and 187.
25. Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 216. See also p. 212-214.
26. Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 113-116.
27. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
28. Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images...*, *op. cit.*, p. 41-65.
29. Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 58-67.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 67-71.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
33. Italian elites did not articulate concern with French resolve in the period before the war. *I Documenti diplomatici italiani*, Rome, Libreria dello Stato, 1952-, Ottava Serie/1, p. 418. See also Mario Toscano, "Eden's Mission to Rome on the Eve of the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict", in George Gooch and Arshag Sarkissian (eds.), *Studies in Diplomatic History and Historiography*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1962, p. 134.
34. Renato Mori, *Mussolini e la conquista dell'Etiopia*, Florence, La Fenice, 1978, p. 91. See also George Baer, *The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 22-23.
35. Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936*, Turin, Einaudi, 1974, p. 640.
36. Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia: studio e documenti, 1932-1936*, Milan, Angeli, 1971, p. 27, 42, 277-278, 292-293 and 294.
37. Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi, 1922-1946*, Naples, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1949, p. 769.
38. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 48-54.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 103-105.
41. Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino: La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940*, Rome, Bonacci, 1980, p. 105.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 86-87.
43. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6, 16, and 18.
44. Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici...*, *op. cit.*, p. 378.
45. Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini...*, *op. cit.*, p. 644-646.
46. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 88-89.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 93-95.
48. Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici...*, *op. cit.*, p. 87-89, 101 and 123.
49. *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1976, Second Series/14, p. 122-123 and 148-150.
50. Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici...*, *op. cit.*, p. 376. See also p. 132.
51. Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal: 25 Juillet 1932-14 Juin 1936*, Paris, Plon, 1957, p. 253.
52. Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra...*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
53. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 156-157.
54. Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi...*, *op. cit.*, p. 217.
55. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
57. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 221.
58. Mussolini claimed he had inserted the word "Europe" at the final session. *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, a cura di Edoardo e Duilio Susmel, Florence, La Fenice, 1951-1963, vol. 27, p. 140. British documents demonstrate the change was made to an earlier draft. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 222, fn. 5.
59. *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/1, p. 63.
60. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 133-134.
61. *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/1, p. 20. Mussolini's doubts continued: see p. 49-50.
62. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 135-136.
63. *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/1, p. 127.
64. *Ibid.*
65. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
66. Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi...*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.
67. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 141-144 and 151-152.
68. Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1962, p. 233.
69. *Opera Omnia...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 27, p. 73.

70. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 280. Emphasis added.
71. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 153-54.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
73. Mario Toscano, "Eden's Mission...", *art. cit.*
74. Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.
75. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 188.
76. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 775-776.
77. Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi...*, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
78. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 202-205.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 218. For Grandi's assessment see *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/1, p. 268.
80. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 219-220.
81. Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 284.
82. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 217-18 and 227.
83. Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 286.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
85. *Opera omnia...*, *op. cit.*, 27, p. 108.
86. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 421.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 434-439.
88. Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 290. Emphasis added. See also *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/1, p. 667-668.
89. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
90. Renato Mori, *Mussolini...*, *op. cit.*, p. 53-54.
91. *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/1, p. 707.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 709. Specifically, Grandi's sources told him that the British had not taken measures for war as of August 15 (p. 751). See also p. 752 and 754.
93. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
94. Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici...*, *op. cit.*, p. 227. See also p. 225-227.
95. Paolo Nello, *Un fedele disubbidiente: Dino Grandi da Palazzo Chigi al 25 luglio*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993, p. 254. See also p. 256.
96. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 261.
97. Renato Mori, *Mussolini...*, *op. cit.*, p. 65 and 68.
98. Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini...*, *op. cit.*, p. 630-631.
99. *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/1, p. 806.
100. *Opera omnia...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 27, p. 119.
101. Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici...*, *op. cit.*, p. 228-230.
102. *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/2, p. 40.
103. On September 10th and 11th, Hoare and Laval had secretly agreed that war with Italy was too high a price to pay to preserve Ethiopian integrity and the League. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 325-326.
104. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 784-790.
105. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 329-331. See also Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 303; *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/2, p. 87 and 90.
106. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 592.
107. Arthur Marder, "The Royal Navy and the Ethiopian Crisis of 1935-36", *American Historical Review*, vol. 75, n° 5, June 1970, p. 1330-1331.
108. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 340.
109. *Ibid.*, p. 339. See also *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/2, p. 105, 109-112 and 134-136; Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi...*, *op. cit.*, p. 269; Renato Mori, *Mussolini...*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
110. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 340-342.
111. *Ibid.*, p. 341.

112. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 630.
113. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 344.
114. *Ibid.* See also Paolo Nello, *Un fedele...*, *op. cit.*, p. 258-259; Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 304.
115. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 639.
116. *Ibid.*, Second Series/14, p. 655-656.
117. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 354.
118. *Ibid.*, p. 346-347. On September 23th Hoare sent a personal note to Mussolini denying that Britain had considered military action or the closure of the Suez Canal to that date. *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/2, p. 149.
119. George Baer, *The Coming...*, *op. cit.*, p. 374.
120. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
121. Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
122. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 716.
123. *Ibid.*, Second Series/14, p. 634. Emphasis added.
124. *I Documenti...*, *op. cit.*, Serie Ottava/1, p. 750, 795, 804 and 866-867.
125. *Documents...*, *op. cit.*, Second Series/14, p. 567-568.

ABSTRACTS

This article offers an explanation of varying perceptions of resolve - the willingness to incur costs in order to reach a contested good. The article argues that domestic actors who publicly and personally invest themselves in policy action are likely to view signals of high adversary resolve more critically than those who do not. Variance in signals is also important. Skeptical "vested" actors view even public signals as indicators of low resolve if the signals contain ambiguity. If "vested" actors dominate the challenger's government, only clear and costly signals are likely to lead the challenger to perceive high defender resolve. I use this approach to explain Italian perceptions of British resolve on the eve of the 1935-36 Italo-Ethiopian War. While many Italian officials came to see British resolve as high, Benito Mussolini was motivated to see the ambiguity in British signals.

Cet article propose une analyse de la perception variable de la résolution (l'attitude qui permet de prendre en compte des coûts pour obtenir un bien contesté). L'article soutient que les acteurs nationaux qui s'investissent personnellement et de façon publique dans l'action politique sont susceptibles de sous-interpréter les signaux provenant de compétiteurs engagés dans une épreuve de force. La variation de ces signaux constitue également un paramètre important. Des acteurs sceptiques ne prennent pas au sérieux des messages, même publics, s'ils contiennent des ambiguïtés. Si des acteurs fortement motivés dominent le gouvernement du compétiteur, alors seulement des signaux clairs et forts (en termes de coûts) de la part du défenseur peuvent amener le compétiteur à percevoir le caractère résolu du défenseur. C'est ce schéma interprétatif que nous utilisons pour expliquer les perceptions italiennes de l'attitude résolue des Britanniques au seuil de la guerre italo-éthiopienne de 1935-1936. Alors que de nombreux officiels italiens percevaient la détermination des Britanniques, Benito Mussolini continuait à insister sur l'ambiguïté des signaux de leur part.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Mussolini, guerre italo-éthiopienne, résolution des acteurs, coûts des signaux, réalisme néo-classique

Keywords: Mussolini, Italo-Ethiopian war, resolve, costly signals, neoclassical realism

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