Regional Approaches to Conflict Prevention: The Effectiveness of Rhetorical & Diplomatic Tools

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Abstract: Research has shown that international actors can contribute to the resolution of and reductions of violence in civil wars through actions such as mediation and peacekeeping. In this article, we focus on conflict prevention, and argue that regional organizations deploying relatively low-cost tools are poised to be effective at preventing conflict from escalating. We present new data on conflict management activities by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), identifying two sets of tools—rhetorical and diplomatic. We examine how these activities affect violence in member states and find that rhetorical and diplomatic activity by ECOWAS is generally associated with reductions in violent events as well as fatalities in the following month. The analyses in this article show that ROs can be effective conflict managers and that early engagement in intrastate disputes, including through relatively low-cost activities such as rhetorical and diplomatic tools—can reduce violence.

Many regional organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), express a commitment to preventing violent conflict and have established early warning systems designed to facilitate their ability to do so. There are a few prominent cases frequently brought up as examples of successful prevention by regional organizations. For instance, in 2017, ECOWAS intervened in The Gambia after President Yahya Jammeh refused to step down following an electoral defeat. Yet, we know relatively little about whether such organizations successfully engage in conflict prevention and which strategies prove the most useful.

A large and growing academic literature has examined the effect of activities such as mediation and peacekeeping that can broadly be thought of as international conflict management. In general, this literature is quite optimistic about the effects of these actions.[1] Some of this literature looks specifically at the role of regional organizations and argues that they can be particularly effective at conflict management.[2] There is a much smaller literature on conflict prevention, with much of it focused on identifying what prevention is,[3] or on qualitative studies of specific prevention efforts.[4] There is little systematic analysis of efforts at conflict prevention and, while the literature on conflict management is generally quite optimistic, scholars' views of the success of prevention efforts seems much more mixed.[5]

In this article, we investigate whether ECOWAS can prevent escalations of violence and, if so, how. We argue that ECOWAS is well positioned to be successful in conflict prevention. Engaging in conflict prevention requires actors to have both the motivation and capacity to act in

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[1] This literature is too large to summarize here. Prominent examples of studies showing the positive effect of mediation include Beber (2012), Bercovitch and Gartner (2008); and Regan and Aydin (2006). Studies of peacekeeping, such as those conducted by Fortna (2004; 2008), and Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2013; 2014) show that peacekeeping can be associated with longer-lasting ceasefires and reductions in violence.

[2] See, for example, Thornton, T. P. (1991); Hentz, J. J., Söderbaum, F., & Tavares, R. (2009); Gartner 2011; Haftel and Hoffman 2017; Tir and Karreth 2011; and Karreth and Tir 2013).

[3] Prominent examples of this literature include Lund (1996) and Ackerman (2003).

[4] See, for example, Féron (2020) and Lewis (2020).

[5] See, for example, Mack and Furlong (2004).

disputes that have not risen to the level of armed conflict, and we argue that ECOWAS and other ROs have both. We further argue that two broad types of actions that ECOWAS engages in are particularly effective at conflict prevention—rhetorical and diplomatic action. Both are relatively low cost, do not require large-scale intrusion into domestic politics, and can be used quickly to respond to conflict escalation.

We examine the effect of rhetorical and diplomatic action by ECOWAS using new data we have collected on conflict prevention and resolution activities by the organization in all member states from 1997 to 2018. These data represent a contribution to existing data on conflict management, because virtually all existing cross-national datasets focused on peacekeeping, mediation, peace processes, or negotiations start with a set of armed conflicts and code conflict management activities during, after, or (in a few cases) before these conflicts.[6] We do not center our data collection around armed conflicts, but rather code all conflict management activities by ECOWAS across all member states. These data allow us to examine the effect of these activities on levels of violence in contexts before, during, and after armed conflict, but also in cases where armed conflicts never break out.

To analyze the effect of these activities on violence, we use data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED-- Raleigh et al. 2010) to measure levels of violence in each country-month. ACLED is useful for this analysis because its data collection is not built around armed conflicts. Instead, ACLED codes a wide range of conflict events across all country-years, with fine-grained temporal and geographic information about where the events take place. We conduct statistical analyses examining how diplomatic and rhetorical action by ECOWAS in one month

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[6] Prominent datasets in studies of conflict management include the Civil War Mediation Dataset (DeRouen, Bercovitch & Pospieszna 2011), the Managing Intrastate Conflict (MIC) Dataset (Croicu et al. 2013) the Peace Accords Matrix (Joshi & Darby 2013) and PA-X (Bell & Badanjak 2019). Each of these datasets starts their data collection with a set of armed conflicts or peace processes, and then provides information about the nature of the conflict management effort in these processes.

affect the number of violent events and the number of fatalities in the subsequent month. We find strong support for the argument that rhetorical activities are associated with lower levels of violence and fatalities. We find more limited support for the effect of diplomatic action on preventing violent escalation. In further analyses, we examine the effect of specific categories of rhetorical and diplomatic action, and find that negative rhetoric and mediation have strong violence-reducing effects.

These findings contribute to our understanding of political violence and conflict management. The quantitative literature on conflict management has tended to focus on high-profile actions like peace processes and the deployment of peacekeepers. Our analysis suggests that more low-cost activities such as rhetorical action and mediation can be effective at reducing violence across a variety of contexts. Regional organizations such as ECOWAS are well positioned to engage in these actions, and thus can play a key role in conflict prevention. We elaborate on these contributions in the conclusion, and lay out an agenda for further research.

ECOWAS and Conflict Prevention

ECOWAS is an organization that was founded in 1975, with fifteen member states, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. The organization was originally founded to focus on economic issues, particularly regional economic integration. However, with the emergence of several civil wars in West Africa in the 1990s, ECOWAS became much more active in armed conflict in the region (Bolaji 2011, Khadiagala 2018), reflecting a broader trend of regional economic organizations becoming involved in matters of security (Haftel & Hofmann 2019). At first, ECOWAS's conflict management strategy was reactive, with its attention primarily focused on ongoing civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote D'Ivoire. Over time, the organization

developed a more proactive strategy of addressing conflicts before they escalated, culminating in its adoption in 1999 of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. That mechanism allows the organization to proactively intervene in member states that are prone to instability. The organization has responded proactively in several countries in West Africa, particularly in response to coup d'états, which are quite common in the region.

Our focus on ECOWAS allows us to examine a range of activities by one organization that has both a commitment to and an institutional infrastructure for conflict prevention. By focusing on one organization, we can hold constant a variety of organizational and regional factors that could influence whether and how rhetorical and diplomatic activities work. While ECOWAS is quite advanced among regional organizations in its expressed commitment to conflict prevention and its track-record of involvement in regional conflicts, there are other regional organizations that we anticipate also being able to respond in this way (Haftel and Hoffman 2017). We return to this point in the conclusion.

A significant academic literature argues that regional organizations are well suited to engage in conflict management, through diplomacy, economic tools, and military intervention. Gartner (2011) and Duursma (2020) argue that ROs make particularly effective mediators. Gartner (2011) finds that ROs often mediate the hardest conflicts and, once this selection is dealt with, are highly effective at promoting lasting ceasefires. Duursma (2020) emphasizes the importance of mediator legitimacy, and shows that African ROs are more effective at negotiating lasting ceasefires than other third parties. Haftel and Hoffman (2017) examine variation among regional economic organizations in whether they develop mechanisms that address security concerns directly or work primarily through economic tools. Bara & Hultman (2020) find that peacekeepers from regional organizations are just as effective at decreasing state violence against civilians as UN peacekeepers (although they are less effective at decreasing armed group violence against civilians).

We argue that regional organizations like ECOWAS are also well positioned to engage in conflict prevention.[7] Conflict prevention requires proactive action—for prevention to be successful, actors must respond to signs of potential escalation before that escalation actually occurs. Acting proactively presents two main challenges to actors that engage in conflict prevention. First, it can be more difficult to convince states and dissidents to allow activities which rely on consent of the parties—such as mediation or peacekeeping—before armed conflict has reached a significant level. When a country is in civil war, it is obvious that the government's monopoly on the use of force has broken down and that there are dissidents with substantial differences from the government willing to incur costs in pursuit of their goals. In that environment, it can be difficult for governments or dissidents to refuse to participate in negotiations or peace processes because they risk international costs for that refusal.

Before violent conflict escalates, however, governments are generally hesitant to have outside actors—such as the United Nations—intervene to manage conflicts in their country. This intervention implies that the government is incapable of managing its internal affairs and can potentially grant some international legitimacy to dissidents by including them in a peace process. Organizations like ECOWAS are not immune to these concerns, but their involvement is likely to be perceived as less of a threat than that of more distant actors, such as the United Nations. Duursma (2020) emphasizes that African ROs hold common norms of anti-imperialism and a commitment to African solutions to African problems, and thus are seen as more legitimate by actors in African disputes. In addition, ECOWAS regularly facilitates diplomatic interactions among

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[7] We are certainly not the first scholars to examine ECOWAS' efforts at conflict prevention. Several studies (such as Afolabi 2009; Atoubi 2010, and Bolaji 2011), examine the organizational mechanisms through which ECOWAS engages in conflict prevention, and suggest ways that these mechanisms can be made more effective. There are also case studies of prominent prevention efforts, including Aning, Okyere, and Abdallah (2012) and Hartman (2017). Tir and Karreth (2011) and Karreth and Tir (2013) do not focus specifically on ROs, but argue that a larger category of "Highly Structured Inter-Governmental Organizations"—which can include ROs generally and does include ECOWAS—can help prevent the escalation of low-intensity armed conflicts to full-scale civil wars.

member states, and so its involvement is more routine. As such, organizations like ECOWAS are better able to intervene in response to signs of potential escalation, at least in relatively low-intrusive ways, than more distant actors.

Second, it can be difficult for organizations outside the region to engage in conflict prevention because the reputational benefits of successful prevention are likely to be lower than for successful conflict mitigation. When actors orchestrate a peace process in civil war and that process leads to an implemented peace agreement, that agreement and subsequent decline in violence is very visible. This visibility can enhance the reputation of the organization. Successful conflict prevention, by contrast, means that violence that could have escalated does not, and this success is much less visible. Organizations may have difficulty investing in prevention because of the differential benefits between responding to actual and potential civil wars.

For regional organizations like ECOWAS, by contrast, the costs of failed prevention are sufficiently high to incentivize engaging in prevention. Because ECOWAS is made up of regional states, it is those actors that will most directly bear costs from violent conflicts in the region. Civil wars often lead to the flow of refugees, and most of these refugees end up in neighboring states. Rebel groups often operate across borders as well, which can create security threats for neighboring states (Salehyan 2009). At the extreme, this can lead to conflict diffusion, in which a civil war in one country helps to cause a civil war in another (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006). Economically, civil war in the region can lead to declines in trade and investment that affect all countries in the region. These negative effects of civil war are felt most profoundly by neighboring states, who are generally also in ECOWAS, and give the organization substantial incentive to work to prevent regional civil wars from occurring.

We anticipate, then, that a regional organization like ECOWAS that has both the capacity and motivation to engage in conflict prevention will take action to prevent violent conflict. We next turn to the question of how ECOWAS can prevent disputes from escalating to violence.

Rhetoric and Diplomacy: How ECOWAS can prevent violent conflict

Violent intrastate conflicts, such as civil wars, occur because states and dissidents have some dispute, or incompatibility, that they are unable to resolve. The presence of a dispute is not sufficient, however, for conflicts to become violent. States and/or dissidents must choose to use violence to try to achieve their goals in the dispute. We assume that states and dissidents, to at least some degree, consider the costs and benefits of their relative strategies when deciding whether to engage in violence or some other strategy for dispute resolution. Given this, we identify two main mechanisms through which outside actors can intervene in ways that lead states and dissidents to choose not to use violence, which we can think of as conflict prevention.

First, outside actors can help states and dissidents to resolve the underlying issues of the conflict. Second, outside actors can manipulate the costs and benefits of violence, relative to other strategies available to states and dissidents. By making violence more costly and other strategies less costly, they can reduce or prevent violence even in cases in which the issues underlying the disputes remain unresolved.

Both mechanisms could be seen at play in ECOWAS's involvement in the crisis in The Gambia in 2017. That crisis erupted after The Gambia's long-running president Yahya Jammeh refused to step down following defeat in a presidential election. ECOWAS quickly deployed troops to the country, placing pressure on Jammeh's government and raising the costs of escalation. The organization then facilitated an agreement in which Jammeh would step down and enter into exile, and the fairly elected government would take over (Hartman 2017).

We see the focus on these two mechanisms as very consistent with the broad literature on conflict management. Scholars have argued that strategies like mediation and military observer missions can help parties to overcome information and commitment problems and to resolve the disputes driving civil wars.[8] Studies of strategies such as economic sanctions, foreign aid, and interpositional peacekeeping missions have argued that these types of tools can raise the costs of violence and benefits of peace, making agreement more attractive to combatants.[9] Indeed, ECOWAS's successful effort in The Gambia very much fits with the broad understanding of how conflict management works.

Unlike the intervention in The Gambia, however, many prevention efforts do not involve military forces and high-profile negotiations among heads of state. These types of interventions generate high costs for organizations and may lead to opposition from governments, making them hard to deploy in situations outside of armed conflict. When ECOWAS responds to coups, for example, it typically does so by issuing condemnations and placing diplomatic pressure on countries to establish timelines for elections.

While we see conflict prevention as working primarily through helping states and dissidents resolve disputes and by changing the costs and benefits of violence vs. other strategies, we argue that the tools through which disputes are resolved and the cost/benefit calculation is changed will typically be different in prevention efforts than in interventions into civil war. In general, tools of conflict prevention need to meet three criteria. First, because states are frequently hesitant to have outsiders interfering in their affairs, tools of conflict prevention need to be relatively non-invasive to

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[8] On mediation and information, see Savun (2008). Fortna (2008) shows that military observer missions lead to longer ceasefires.

[9] On peacekeeping raising the costs to actors of engaging in violence, see Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2013; 2014). Hultman and Peksen (2017) argue that arms embargoes can make violent conflict more costly. The relationship between aid and civil war is complicated, see Findlay (2017) for an overview of the literature on that topic.

not provoke opposition from the government. Second, because regional organizations in conflict-torn regions typically have relatively low resources and the benefits to organizations like ECOWAS of engaging in conflict prevention are relatively small, less costly strategies will be more commonly used. Third, while violent conflicts often arise out of long-lasting grievances, they often escalate quickly in response to unforeseen triggers. This rapid escalation means that strategies that can be used quickly are more likely to be effective in conflict prevention.

Conflict Prevention Strategies: Rhetorical Action

We argue that two main types of strategies fit these three criteria—rhetorical and diplomatic action—and that these are key conflict prevention tools. Rhetorical action involves statements targeted toward the behavior of actors in disputes. These can include resolutions urging the actors involved to cooperate or condemnations of specific actions such as state repression or the use of terrorism by non-state actors. ECOWAS utilizes multiple rhetorical strategies to prevent violence, one critical example of this was seen in Mali in March 2012.

   While ECOWAS had already employed several rhetorical tactics in Mali regarding the Tuareg rebellion prior to March 2012, their involvement escalated drastically when military officials took over the government on March 21 over concerns with the handling of the rebellion. Immediately, ECOWAS strongly condemned the coup and urged the leaders to return the country to civilian rule. Within one week of the coup, ECOWAS was able to issue multiple threats of sanctions and condemnations, and also held several meetings to determine the next course of action. These rhetorical actions targeted the military junta for their coup and the root causes of the coup by pushing the Tuaregs to reduce their violence with threats. Their work on both aspects of the Malian crisis helped propel their mediation efforts forward as the coup leaders agreed to a transitional

government at the beginning of April. Rhetorical actions like this are commonly used by ECOWAS to widely express their position and wanted outcome.

These rhetorical statements are relatively easy for organizations like ECOWAS to make. They typically do not bind the organization to any specific action. They can also be made quickly because they do not require mobilization of resources, hiring personnel, or establishing a new office. In addition, while the targets of these rhetorical actions may not like them, they do not require their consent in the way that more high-profile activities like peacekeeping and mediation typically do.

Given that rhetorical actions like condemnations, threats, and urging cooperation are relatively costless for organizations like ECOWAS to make, it may seem that disputants would just ignore them, viewing them as "cheap talk." And, indeed, on their own they are unlikely to either help resolve disputes or to change the relative costs and benefits of violence versus other strategies to states and dissidents. We argue, however, that these statements can change state and dissident behavior because they send a signal that ECOWAS member states are paying attention, have aligned preferences related to the disputes, and that more costly action—such as economic pressure or even military engagement—is likely coming next if disputants stay on the path to escalation.[10] Disputants know that the member states have incentives to engage in conflict management and the texts of resolutions can provide signals for how they intend to do so. As such, while rhetorical strategies on their own are unlikely to convince actors to choose compromise over armed conflict, they can lead to reductions in violence as states and dissidents assess the signal they send and the potential for further international involvement and adjust their behavior accordingly.

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[10] In a similar logic, Kim (2021) argues that condemnations issued by the United Nations Security Council can signal preference alignment and therefore convey information to disputants in international crises. She finds that condemnations with severe rhetoric are associated with a decreased probability of escalation.

This leads to our first empirical prediction about ECOWAS' conflict prevention activities. Our expectation is that rhetorical action by ECOWAS, ceteris paribus, will be associated with lower levels of violence.

Hypothesis 1: When ECOWAS engages in rhetorical action, levels of violence will decrease.

Conflict Prevention Strategies: Diplomatic Action

Organizations like ECOWAS have a range of diplomatic actions that they can take to try to help states and dissidents to resolve disputes and to de-escalate conflicts. At the most basic, ECOWAS meets frequently, and regularly scheduled meetings can provide a forum to discuss a regional response to an escalating crisis. The organization also frequently appoints envoys to deal with a specific situation and deploys fact finding missions designed to establish what is happening on the ground. Diplomatic action can also involve conducting shuttle diplomacy, organizing bilateral talks with governments and/or dissidents. The most direct diplomatic action focused on conflict prevention is mediation.

Diplomatic action is not as costless as rhetorical action, as it does generally involve spending some resources and deploying some personnel. However, the type of diplomatic action that ECOWAS engages in is also quite routine for the organization, and part of what it typically does. As such, it generally does not involve trying to fundraise from member states or having to hire new personnel. During the 2012 Malian crisis explored above, ECOWAS was able to hold multiple meetings between the conflict actors and amongst its member states within one week of the March 21 government takeover. These meetings occurred without any special circumstances, and they included a fact-finding mission by ECOWAS member states' chiefs of defense. Ultimately the coup

in Mali ended due to multiple mediation meetings led by ECOWAS that pushed for the return to civilian rule and was resolved with an agreement to form a transitional government.

Diplomatic action can serve to prevent escalation of violent conflict primarily by helping parties to resolve disputes. One of the key goals of these diplomatic actions is gathering information and providing it to the disputants. Diplomatic envoys who engage in fact-finding can facilitate this information revelation. This can help disputants to identify potential areas of compromise, as well as to minimize distrust about the activities of the other parties. In addition, diplomatic action, such as mediation, can help parties to identify substantive and creative ways to resolve disputes that they might have difficulty identifying on their own. The large academic literature on mediation has shown that mediators can frequently help parties to reach agreements that they had difficulty reaching on their own. In addition, several studies show that mediators that share characteristics with the disputants are often seen as more legitimate and so can be more effective. Reid (2017), for example, shows that what she calls "credibility leverage" is more important than "capability leverage" at mediation success. Duursma (2020), in a similar vein, shows that African mediators are more effective than non-African mediators in mediation efforts in civil wars.

Diplomatic action, like rhetorical action, can also have an effect of signaling that further costly action may be coming. As such, while diplomacy itself is unlikely to directly shape the cost-benefit calculus of states and dissidents, it can indirectly shape it through the potential for future costs of escalation or future benefits of de-escalation. Diplomats deployed by ECOWAS can use these threats and promise of costs/benefits to try to incentivize peace, and are well positioned to do so because of their knowledge of the region, country involved, and disputants. This knowledge puts them in a position to target potential costs and benefits more effectively.

This discussion leads to our second hypothesis, about the effects of diplomatic action on levels of violence. As with Hypothesis 1, we expect that diplomatic action will lead to reductions in violence in contexts of civil war, low intensity armed conflict, and periods without violence.

Hypothesis 2: When ECOWAS engages in diplomatic action, levels of violence will decrease.

Data on Rhetorical and Diplomatic Action by ECOWAS

Testing these hypotheses about the effect of rhetorical and diplomatic action on levels of violence requires systematic data on the use of these strategies by ECOWAS. Several data collection efforts present information about conflict management activities in civil wars and violent conflicts more generally, including the Civil War Mediation Dataset (DeRouen, Bercovitch & Pospieszna 2011), the Managing Intrastate Conflict (MIC) Dataset (Croicu et al. 2013) the Peace Accords Matrix (Joshi & Darby 2013), PA-X (Bell & Badanjak 2019), and the African Peace Process dataset (Duursma & Gamez 2022). These data have been used to examine whether and how international conflict management contributes to the resolution of violent conflicts.

In this article, we are interested in the effect of conflict management by regional organizations in disputes that have just emerged, low-intensity disputes that are either not violent or at a low level of violence, as well as in periods in and around armed conflicts. Data that are limited to periods in and around armed conflict do not allow us to test the effect of ECOWAS rhetorical and diplomatic action in all of these contexts. To address this gap, we have collected new data on a large range of activities by ECOWAS oriented toward conflict management. These data cover ECOWAS activities in all member states for the period 1997-2018. We collected these event data using Factiva and Nexis Uni, including close to 50 search terms that captured a variety of actions.[11]

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[11] A complete list of keywords can be found in the appendix.

Our data include information on the use of a range of rhetorical and diplomatic actions by

ECOWAS. Rhetorical actions include both negative rhetoric like accusations or condemnations, as

well as positive rhetoric like praise or endorsements. Diplomatic actions include mediation, envoy

appointments, fact-finding missions, bilateral talks with country leaders and politically relevant non-

state actors, and meetings between member states on how to address conflicts.[12] Figure 1 shows the

frequency of the different types of rhetorical and diplomatic action in which ECOWAS engages.

Detailed examples of each of the types of actions illustrated in Figure 1 can be found in the

appendix.

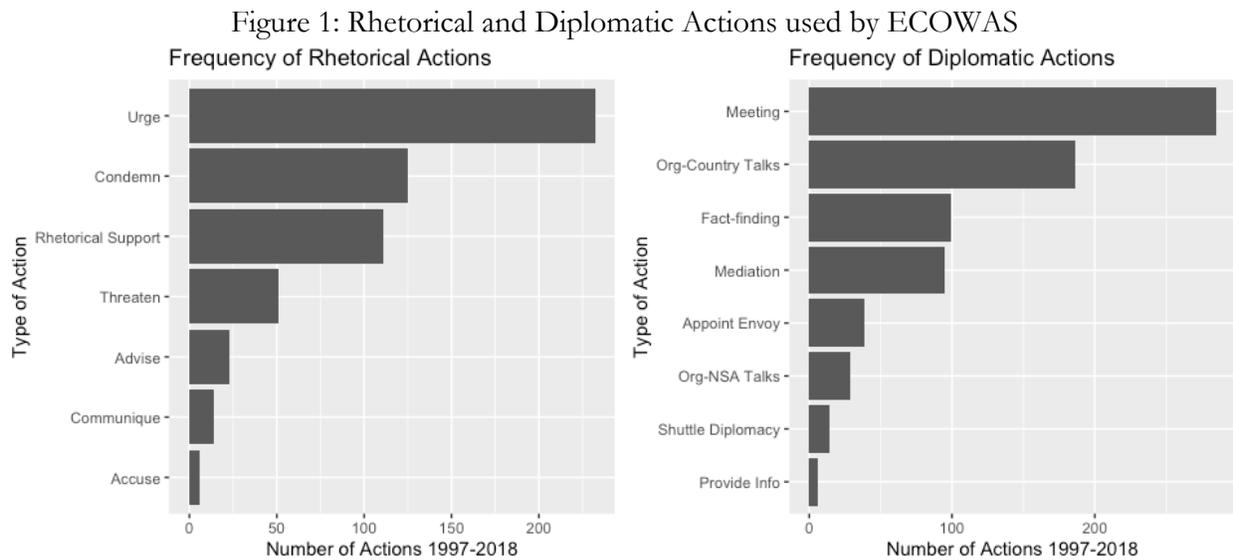Figure 1: Rhetorical and Diplomatic Actions used by ECOWAS

Figure 1 shows that the three most frequent types of rhetorical and diplomatic action that

ECOWAS engages in across all country contexts are meetings (diplomatic), urging parties to take a

certain action (rhetorical), and talks with member countries (org-country talks) (diplomatic). The

high frequency of meetings supports the reasoning that regional organizations may be in a good

position to respond quickly to escalating crises because regional organizations tend to have regularly

scheduled meetings, which provide a frequent forum to coordinate regional responses to conflicts in

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[12] Meetings typically take place when ECOWAS member states are planning how to address a conflict in a
member country.

the region. Indeed, the main focus of most meetings of ECOWAS was security concerns in the region, and the products of these meetings were often concrete actions such as sending mediators or peacekeepers, or rhetorical action to prevent or manage conflict.

Urging parties to take a certain action is the second most frequent activity in which ECOWAS engages. This type of rhetorical action could speak to a range of topics, again urging mediation or the resolution of a coup, as well as for parties to respect a ceasefire or stop the use of violence. This is a low-cost action that may still send a signal to state and non-state actors that the organization is monitoring their activities and may take direct action in the future.

Talks with member countries (org-country talks) are the third most frequent type of action, and typically took place in the context of formal or informal mediation. ECOWAS sends an envoy or delegation to discuss conflict management in the country, for instance trying to convince the government to enter into talks with an armed group, resolve a coup, or stop repressive action against civilians. In conducting these meetings, ECOWAS is likely able to be more responsive to tensions in member countries than the United Nations. Indeed, often as tensions arose within a member state, ECOWAS sent representatives within a couple of days.

In our data collection, we did not differentiate between actions that are taken in response to ongoing violent conflicts and those that take place prior to the outbreak of conflict. In some cases, the distinction between conflict prevention and conflict resolution is clear-cut, but in many cases it is not. Civil wars are often preceded by a period of low-level violence that eventually escalates, and we could think about international actions in these periods as either "prevention" or "resolution." Likewise, lingering violence often follows negotiated agreements in civil war, and international actors can stay engaged for years. Additionally, many outbreaks of civil war actually involve the recurrence of a previous conflict following a period of dormancy, meaning that actions taken in the post-conflict environment can, in some cases, be thought of as both conflict prevention and conflict

resolution as well. In our data, more than half of ECOWAS' diplomatic actions and close to 60% of rhetorical actions are carried out when countries are not in civil war, as illustrated in Figure 2.[13]

Figure 2. RO Actions in War and Out of War
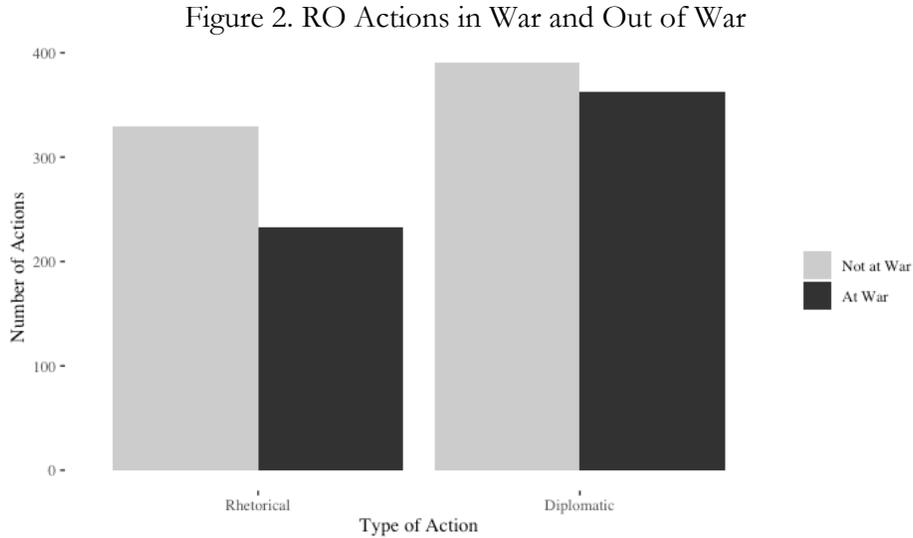
Empirical Analysis

We use these data to test the effect of ECOWAS rhetorical and diplomatic actions on levels of violence by examining the relationship between the monthly counts of rhetorical and diplomatic actions, violent events, and fatalities in each ECOWAS member state from 1997-2018.[14] We include all country-months, including those that follow months with no violent events or fatalities. This set-up allows us to examine the impact of ECOWAS action in cases where there is no violence, low levels of violence, and full-scale civil war. However, we investigate the relationship within various subsets of the data following the main analysis.

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[13] To determine this, we follow the Peace Research Institute Oslo/Uppsala Conflict Database measure of armed conflict (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Petterson & Oberg 2020), meaning that a country is considered at war if it experiences 25 or more battle related fatalities in conflict between the government and one or more organized rebel groups in a calendar year.

[14] We are unable to include Cape Verde in our analysis because ACLED does not collect data on Cape Verde.

We conceptualize the "success" of conflict prevention as reductions in violence, and so our empirical analysis is structured to examine whether rhetorical and diplomatic activities are associated with lower levels of violence in the following month. We use two general measures of violence—the number of violent events that occur in the month, and the number of fatalities due to violence in each month. Fatalities are the most direct measure of the level of violence, and data on armed conflict typically use a battle-death threshold to measure whether civil war is occurring. As such, reducing fatalities is a key component of conflict prevention. At the same time, many violent events do not lead to fatalities, particularly when the country is not in armed conflict. Looking at violent events more generally allows us to examine patterns of violence in cases which are not in civil war.

Our measures of violent events and fatalities are built using the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010). Several datasets can be used to measure violence, however ACLED is one of the most comprehensive in that it captures violence at all stages of a conflict, including low-level violence that falls below the threshold of "civil war".[15] This is crucial to capture the ways in which ECOWAS actions may prevent low-level violence from escalating to higher levels of violence. Violent events is a count of the number of events identified as battles, explosions/remote violence, and violence against civilians in the country-month in the ACLED data.[16] Fatalities is a measure of the total number of fatalities identified by the ACLED data across these events in a country-month. We log-transform both the number of violent events and the number of fatalities in the analyses since both variables have a substantial skew.

Our independent variables, rhetorical and diplomatic actions, are original measures of the number of ECOWAS actions taken toward a country in each month, which in our data ranges from zero to ten for rhetorical actions and zero to 13 for diplomatic actions. Each action represents an

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[15] This is in contrast to UCDP-the most widely used dataset in quantitative studies of the relationship between international conflict management efforts and violence (i.e. Hultman et al. 2014).
[16] These are the three event types that ACLED classifies as "violent events" (ACLED 2021, 8)

instance in which ECOWAS engaged in a distinct behavior that was motivated by a desire to prevent or manage a conflict within one of its member states. For instance, in Gambia in January 2017, after President Yahya Jammeh refused to step down, rhetorical action takes a value of 4, which comprises ECOWAS urging the President to step down and threatening military intervention early in the month, then hailing the President's decision to step down at multiple points later in the month. In the same country-month, diplomatic action takes a value of 6, which comprises four meetings, some among countries' leaders, others by military officials, as well as two episodes of mediation.

Our operationalization of ECOWAS rhetorical and diplomatic action weighs each activity equally. While we acknowledge that all RO actions are unlikely to have an equal effect on conflict prevention, we do not have enough information to weight actions based on their type. As a result, our findings should be interpreted with our approach of weighing all actions equally in mind. In further analyses presented below, we disaggregate rhetorical and diplomatic actions into specific types of activities, to examine the patterns across these activities.

Figure 3 illustrates the violent events over time in black and months with RO actions in red from 1997-2018. The figure demonstrates that in some cases, ECOWAS diplomatic and rhetorical action aligns with violence to a high degree, for instance in Cote D'Ivoire, Liberia, and Mali. However, in other instances, increases in violence are not associated with action on the part of ECOWAS, such as in Niger and Burkina Faso. Despite this variation, it is clear that endogeneity is a concern when seeking to understand the relationship between ECOWAS action and violence, as ECOWAS is very likely to engage in rhetorical and diplomatic action in response to violence, or at least the threat of violence.

Figure 3. Violent Events & RO Actions
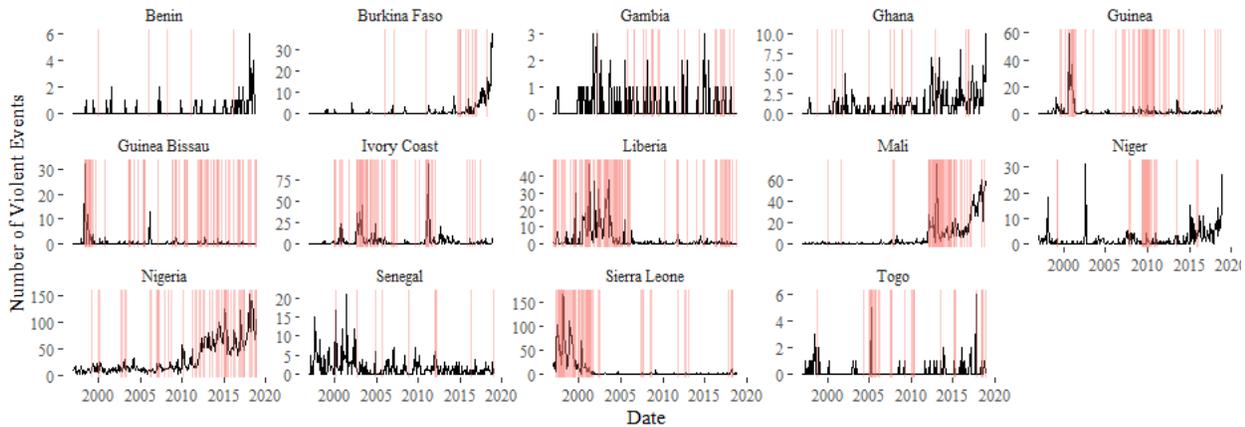
As such, we need to examine the impact of violence on ECOWAS action to properly examine how that action influences violence. To do so, we include a lagged dependent variable in each model. In the models where (logged) fatalities in the next month is the DV, we include (logged) fatalities in the current month, and in the models where (logged) violent events in the subsequent month is the DV, we include (logged) violent events in the current month. We also include other control variables to address alternative explanations that may drive the relationship between RO action and violent conflict.

Two of these control variables include information about other conflict prevention/management activities that may be occurring in the country at the same time. In at least some of the periods when ECOWAS engages in rhetorical and diplomatic action, ECOWAS and/or other actors are also engaging in other activities. These other activities might lead to reductions in violence and, if we do not include measures of them, we might incorrectly attribute a violence-reducing effect to rhetorical and diplomatic action. To deal with this, we include a binary variable indicating whether the country was targeted with sanctions in the year,[17] a logged count of United

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[17] Data come from the Global Sanctions Database (Felbermayr et al. 2020, Kirilakha et al. 2021).

Nations Peacekeepers deployed to the country in the month,[18] and a logged count of regional peacekeepers deployed to the country in the year.[19]

We include several additional control variables to deal with factors that could drive both violence and ECOWAS action. We include a linear indicator of the year, as news reporting has improved over time, making event measures based on news reports able to capture greater numbers of events over time. We also include a trend of ECOWAS action, capturing the average number of rhetorical and diplomatic actions taken by ECOWAS in the country over the past three months. Finally, we include country fixed effects in all models. As can be seen in Figure 3 above, ECOWAS member states vary greatly in the average number of events they have over time. We are interested in the impact of ECOWAS action on the timing of events and including country fixed effects gives us the best approach to modeling that relationship. In addition, including fixed effects allows us to account for any confounding due to non-time-varying country characteristics, ECOWAS action and violence. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each variable used in the main analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Violent events (logged)	3,696	0.71	1.09	0	0	1.1	5
Fatalities (logged)	3,696	0.83	1.55	0	0	1.1	8
Rhetorical Actions	3,696	0.15	0.64	0	0	0	10
Diplomatic Actions	3,696	0.20	0.81	0	0	0	12
Sanctions	3,696	0.51	0.50	0	0	1	1
UN PK Troops	3,690	1.21	3.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	9.77
Regional PK Troops	3,696	0.53	2.22	0	0	0	12
Linear Year	3,696	10.50	6.35	0	5	16	21
ECOWAS Action Trend	3,668	0.36	1.07	0.00	0.00	0.33	15.00

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[18] Data come from the UN Peacekeeping Personnel Data Project (Kathman 2013).
[19] Data come from Bara & Hultman (2020).

Table 2 shows the results of four regressions. The first model shows the relationship between rhetorical action in the current month and (logged) violent events in the following month. The second model shows the relationship between rhetorical action in the current month on (logged) fatalities the following month. The third model shows the relationship between diplomatic action in the current month and (logged) violent events in the following month, and the fourth model shows the relationship between diplomatic action in the current month and (logged) fatalities in the following month. All relationships are modeled using generalized linear models.[20]

Table 2. The Relationship between ECOWAS Action and Violence

	Dependent variable:			
	Violent Events	Fatalities	Violent Events	Fatalities
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Rhetorical action	-0.061***	-0.081**		
	(0.021)	(0.034)		
Diplomatic action			-0.026	-0.037
			(0.019)	(0.030)
Sanctions	0.055*	-0.078*	0.054*	-0.079*
	(0.029)	(0.046)	(0.029)	(0.046)
UN PK Troops	0.010**	0.031***	0.010**	0.031***
	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.008)
Regional PK Troops	0.033***	0.022***	0.034***	0.024***
	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.008)
Year (Linear)	0.008***	0.021***	0.008***	0.021***
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Violence (Current Month)	0.620***		0.619***	
	(0.014)		(0.014)	
Fatalities (Current Month)		0.435***		0.433***
		(0.015)		(0.015)
ECOWAS Action Trend	0.076***	0.124***	0.066***	0.112***
	(0.014)	(0.021)	(0.015)	(0.024)
Constant	-0.160***	-0.179**	-0.156***	-0.174**

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[20] We use linear models rather than count models because negative binomial models (the appropriate count model given the distribution of our dependent variable) did not converge for all models.

	(0.044)	(0.070)	(0.044)	(0.070)
Observations	3,648	3,648	3,648	3,648
Log Likelihood	-3,290.027	-5,010.360	-3,293.120	-5,012.466
Akaike Inf. Crit.	6,622.054	10,062.720	6,628.240	10,066.930

Note: *p<0.1**p<0.05***p<0.01

Models 1 and 2 strongly support our expectation that ECOWAS rhetorical action leads to reductions in violence. The coefficient for rhetorical action is negative and statistically significant for both the number of violent events and fatalities. In models 3 and 4 the sign on ECOWAS diplomatic action is also negative, but neither coefficient is statistically significant at conventional levels. This suggests that diplomatic action is generally associated with lower levels of violence and fatalities, but our confidence in these estimates is low.

The patterns on some of the control variables are somewhat surprising. Economic sanctions have a positive and statistically significant relationship with violent events, and both UN and regional peacekeeping troops have a positive and statistically significant relationship with fatalities. For sanctions, there is a large literature that has somewhat mixed findings, but some studies suggest that imposed sanctions are often not effective at reducing violence in civil wars.[21] The literature on peacekeeping, however, consistently shows that peacekeeping reduces violence, the opposite of the finding on fatalities here. However, we think that the pattern identified here is likely due to our inclusion of *all* country months, not just those during and following armed conflict. Peacekeepers are much more likely to be deployed in reaction to violent conflicts, and peacekeeping missions usually are at their highest numbers immediately following civil wars. As such, there are many months in our data with both zero peacekeepers and zero fatalities, which is likely driving this result. The finding on ECOWAS rhetorical action when controlling for the presence of sanctions and

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[21] See, for example, Hultman and Peksen (2071).

peacekeepers, suggests that its violence-reducing effect is not driven by other conflict management activities taking place concurrently.

The measures of violence and fatalities in the current month are positive and statistically significant, suggesting that levels of violence persist over time. The measure of the trend in ECOWAS's rhetorical and diplomatic action is also positive and statistically significant, suggesting that violence and fatalities both increase following periods in which ECOWAS has engaged in more action. We believe that this pattern is driven by the endogenous relationship between violence and ECOWAS action, and also controlling for past ECOWAS action. Finally, the linear year trend is positive and significant, as expected, suggesting that the number of violent events and fatalities has increased over time, likely as a result of increased news coverage. We see the consistent negative relationship between ECOWAS rhetorical action in one month and the number of violent events and fatalities in the subsequent month when controlling for current violence, past ECOWAS action, the linear year, and country-level fixed effects as strong evidence that these actions can lead to reductions in violence on a month-by-month basis.

To examine the substantive significance of the relationship between ECOWAS rhetorical and diplomatic action and violence, we calculate predicted violence in year t+1 based on the number of rhetorical and diplomatic actions in the current month (according to the models in Table 2). Figure 4 shows the predicted values.

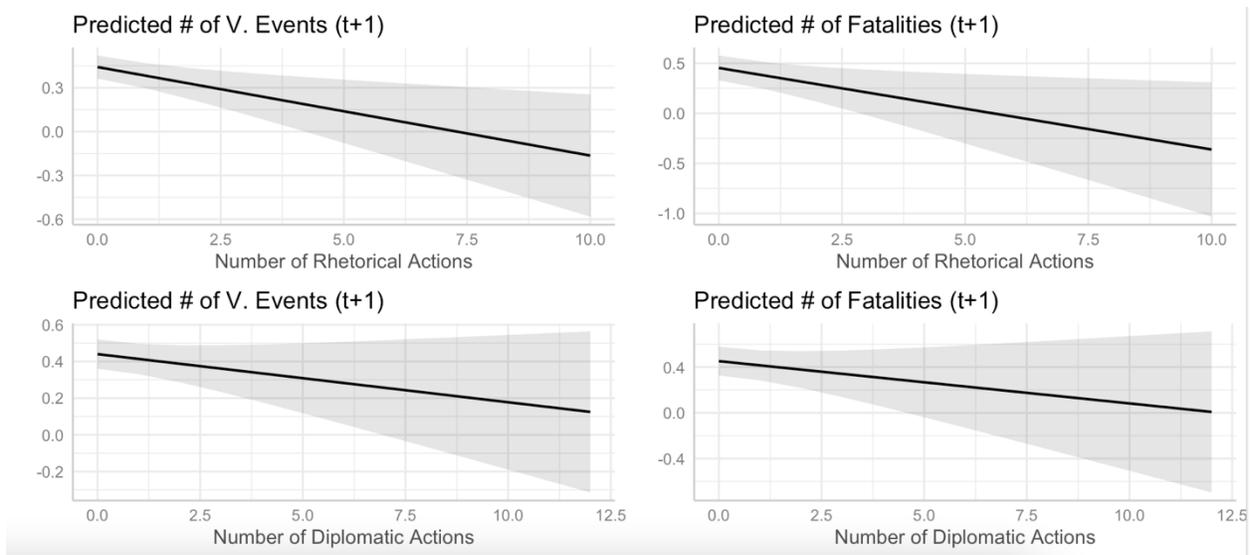Figure 4: Predicted Effects of Rhetorical and Diplomatic actions

Figure 4 shows that rhetorical actions can have a substantial violence-reducing effect. Going from 0 to 5 rhetorical actions leads to a more than 50% decrease in the predicted number of violent events and fatalities, on average. The measures of diplomatic action show a smaller effect, and the confidence intervals around the predicted effects get large very quickly.

The Effect of Individual Rhetorical and Diplomatic Actions

The measures of rhetorical and diplomatic action that we include in Table 2 are both made up of various different actions. In our next series of analyses, we disaggregate rhetorical and diplomatic action into types of action to see if specific activities have differential impacts on violence. For rhetorical action, we generally group them into positive/neutral rhetoric—which includes rhetorical support, advice, or a communique, and negative rhetoric, which includes urging, condemning, threatening, and accusing. We divide diplomatic action into three types—meetings, mediation, and information provision (which includes fact-finding or the publication of reports on conflict-related events). In the example of The Gambia in January 2017 described above, we identify two examples of negative rhetoric and two of positive rhetoric, the meetings variable is coded as four, and the

mediation variable includes two instances of mediation. We model the relationship between the number of actions in each category and violent events and fatalities using the same specification as in the main models in Table 2.[22]

Figure 5 shows the relationship between these activities and violent events (logged) as well as their relationship with fatalities (logged). 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.
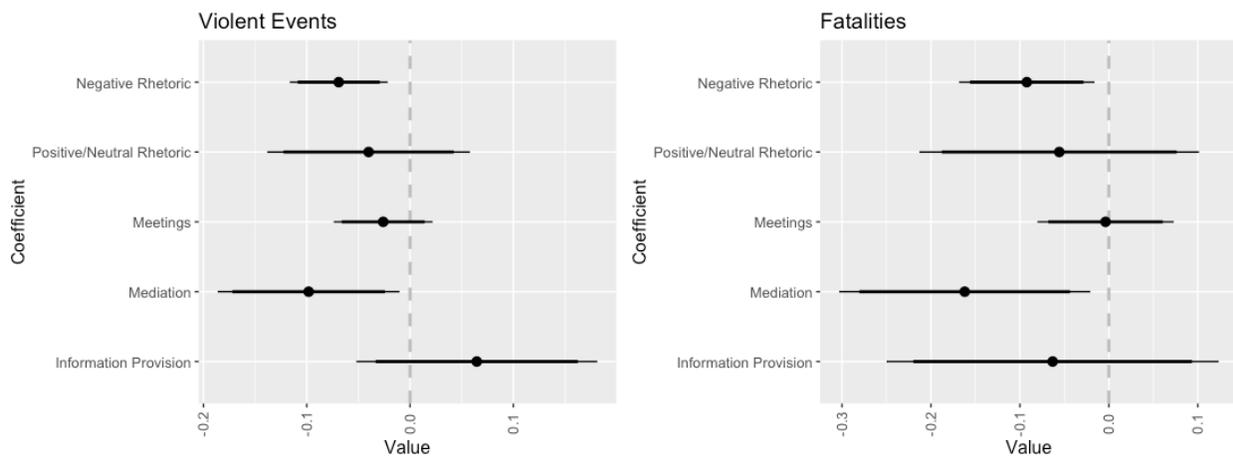
Figure 5. Categorized ECOWAS Actions & Violence

Figure 5 shows that when examining each category separately, two specific actions--negative rhetoric and mediation—are significantly associated with reductions in violent events and fatalities. Negative rhetoric involves statements that comprise urging, condemning, threatening, and accusing the target. The relationship that we see here provides support for our argument that negative rhetoric can play a role in violence reduction by demonstrating that ECOWAS member states have aligned preferences and signaling that further, more costly, intervention may be coming. While we do not find a statistically significant violence reducing effect of positive rhetoric, this may be because in

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[22] This means we use generalized linear models and control for sanctions, UN PK troops, regional PK troops, violence in the current month, RO action trend, and time, along with country level fixed effects.

some cases positive rhetoric comes in response to de-escalation of conflict, as we see in the example of The Gambia in January 2017. In cases like this, positive rhetoric would occur when violence was already trending down.

The finding on mediation is also potentially important. In the main analysis in Table 2 we do not find a statistically significant impact of diplomatic action generally, and in the analysis in Figure 5 we do not find that meetings or information provision have a significant impact on either violence or fatalities. Mediation appears to be the one diplomatic strategy that has a consistently negative effect. There is a large literature on mediation, and that literature generally shows that mediation can lead to reductions in violence. However, quantitative studies in that literature almost always focus on periods in and around civil war, and thus primarily examine the impact of mediation of negotiations between armed combatants. Our data includes many instances of mediation that take place outside the context of civil war. The finding that this broader measure of mediation, across all country months in ECOWAS member states, is associated with reductions in violent events and fatalities suggests that mediation can be an important tool of conflict prevention as well.

Additional Analyses

We further investigate the effect of ECOWAS diplomatic and rhetorical action on violence through several additional tests. Our first set of tests provide further examination of trends in violence. These trends almost certainly shape the relationship between RO action and changes in violent events and fatalities. In the main analysis we control for the number of violent events and fatalities in month t to capture trends in contention. Here, we include two additional specifications. In the first, we add a control for the level of violent events or fatalities (logged) at t-1. In the second, we control for seasonal trends in violence by including a variable for the number of violent events and fatalities (logged) in the same month in the prior year. The direction of the coefficients remains

negative, however statistical significance is lost for rhetorical action in the models including the measures of violence/fatalities in the previous month. The coefficients along with their confidence intervals are shown in Figure 6 below, with light blue depicting violent events and dark blue depicting fatalities.

Figure 6. Robustness Tests: Violence Trends
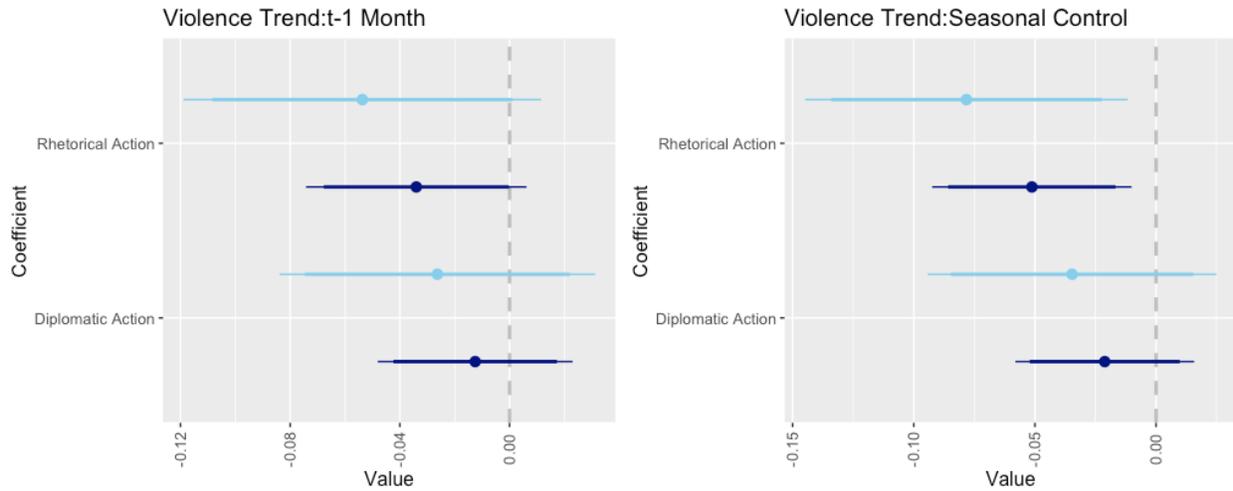
The second set of tests addresses the many periods of no activity in our data. Our original sample includes all country-months from 1997 to 2018. However, many of these months are defined by no RO actions and no violence. To investigate the robustness of our results, we run our models on two different sub-samples. First, we drop all cases in which the change in violent events between t and t+1 is zero, meaning that the subset only includes cases in which violent events either increase or decrease between t and t+1. Second, we subset our data to cases characterized by at least one violent event at time t-1, t, or t+1. Our findings remain largely unchanged with this focus on violent contexts, dropping uneventful months from our analysis.

We run a number of additional robustness tests. In our main analysis, we conceptualize RO actions as a count variable. In a different specification, we include a model that uses a binary measure of RO action, capturing whether ECOWAS took any action in a country month, rather than how many actions the organization took. These models do not show a statistically significant

relationship between RO action and violence in most models, except for one which actually shows a positive relationship (between diplomatic action and violent events). This pattern suggests that the quantity of RO action is central to ROs' effectiveness in curbing violence. Finally, we include a model with election-related controls, since elections can be especially contentious times, a dynamic that we saw in the case of Nigeria.[23] The coefficients along with their confidence intervals are shown in Figure 7 below, with light blue depicting violent events and dark blue depicting fatalities.

Figure 7. Robustness Tests: Subsets, Binary Outcome, and Election Related Controls

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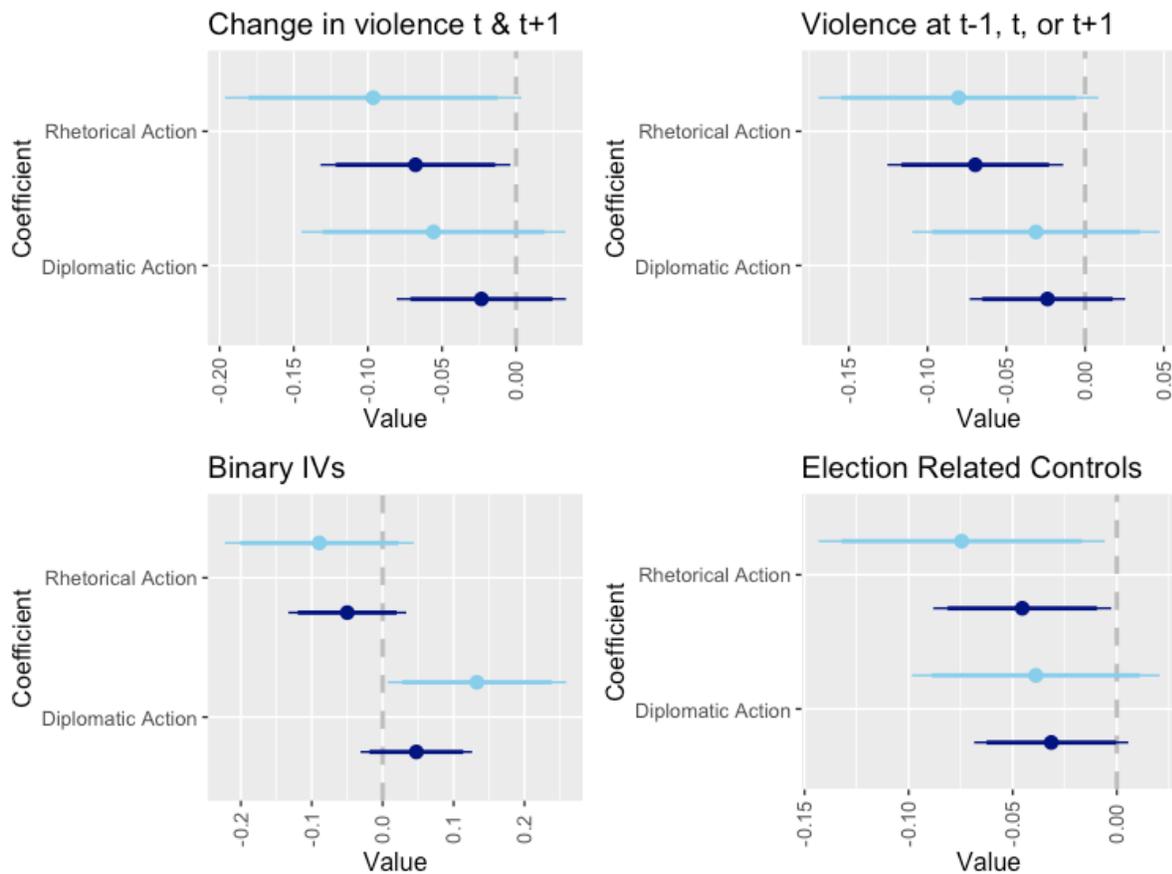
[23] We include three controls: whether there was an election in the past six months, whether there is an election expected in the next six months, and whether there is an election in the current month. All variables are drawn from the REIGN data.

Conclusion

Violent conflicts, such as civil wars, cause immense suffering and pose significant challenges for their neighbors, countries in the region more broadly, and the international community. For the past thirty years, international actors have worked to manage these conflicts, with the United Nations at the forefront. This has included high-profile actions such as deploying tens of thousands of peacekeepers to countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, or coordinating high-level talks in Geneva, Arusha, and other prominent locations leading to comprehensive peace agreements. A large body of academic research has suggested that these high-profile conflict management activities—particularly UN peacekeeping and mediation of comprehensive negotiations—can lead to longer-lasting peace agreements and reductions in violence.

Beyond the UN, actions by organizations like ECOWAS have received significant attention. ECOWAS played a prominent role in contributing to the end of several civil wars in West Africa in the late 1990s/early 2000s, and more recently the role of the organization in The Gambia has been lauded. These is much less academic work on the overall effect of conflict management by regional organizations like ECOWAS, but that literature has suggested that these organizations may be well suited to respond to some of the most difficult civil wars.

In this article, we look beyond these high-profile military and diplomatic responses to civil wars, and examine a much larger range of conflict management activities that ECOWAS engages in. In particular, we do not look just at actions that take place in and around armed conflict, but rather we examine all actions that the organization engages in. This set up allows us to analyze how and to what degree ECOWAS acts to prevent violent conflict.

The findings of our statistical analyses make key contributions to our understanding of conflict management. We find a consistent violence-reducing effect of rhetorical actions, and

particularly of negative rhetoric. Studies of human rights have examined the effect of condemnations by actors such as the United Nations on aid levels and the human rights behavior of governments. However, these rhetorical actions generally receive much less attention in studies of conflict management. Our analysis suggests that organizations like ECOWAS can facilitate reductions in violence by condemning signs and acts of escalation and threatening further action if that escalation occurs. These rhetorical actions are relatively easy for ROs to make, and they can be made quickly. As such, this is an important strategy that can be effective before escalation to full-scale civil war.

We also find that mediation leads to reductions of both violent events and fatalities. Unlike rhetorical actions, mediation as a strategy of conflict resolution has generated a very large academic literature, and that literature generally shows that it can help parties negotiate comprehensive agreements and lead to reductions in violence. Quantitative studies, however, have almost entirely focused on the effect of mediation across a set of violent conflicts. Our analysis here shows that mediation can also play an important role in preventing escalations of violence in low-intensity disputes which have the potential to become civil wars.

These findings have important implications for both scholars trying to understand political violence and practitioners working to reduce it. Further research can provide more insights into these dynamics. We identify two main avenues for research. First, the analysis in this article focuses specifically on ECOWAS, an organization which frequently engages in conflict management, including high-profile efforts. We anticipate that other regional organizations will be able to play similar roles. A number of other African ROs, such as the African Union, the Inter-Governmental Agency on Development (IGAD) in the Horn of Africa and the Southern Africa Development Corporation (SADC) have mechanisms for conflict prevention, and express a commitment to reducing violence. In addition, there are likely many other ROs that, while they may be unlikely to deploy peacekeepers or facilitate high-profile negotiations designed to end civil wars, can engage in

rhetorical action and lower-key diplomatic efforts. Further research looking at a wider set of organizations would provide further insight into when and how these organizations can contribute to reductions in violence.

Second, the link between rhetorical action and violence reduction could be explored further by a more direct focus on the impact of condemnations, threats, and other rhetorical actions on state and dissident behavior. Here, we observe a reduction in levels of violence in country-months following higher levels of rhetorical actions. Qualitative analysis of some cases where ECOWAS (and other ROs) have engaged in rhetorical action would illustrate the process through which these reductions happen. A better understanding of this relationship would advance scholarly understanding of conflict management and help guide practitioners in how to work constructively to de-escalate low-intensity disputes.

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