Can Regional Organizations Reduce Violence?*

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Abstract

Many Regional Organizations (ROs) have developed significant institutional capacity for conflict management, but these organizations vary substantially in their capabilities. I argue that ROs with greater conflict management capacity contribute to reduced violence in member states because such capacity enables coordinated deployment of multiple conflict management tools, facilitates rapid response to escalating conflicts, and allows organizations to work effectively alongside international actors. Statistical analyses of 18 regional organizations from 1989-2010 provide robust support for this argument: states in organizations with greater conflict management capacity experience lower levels of violence than comparable states, with this relationship holding across multiple model specifications and alternative measures of violence. These findings suggest that continued investment in organizational capacity—diplomatic mechanisms, military capabilities, and institutional infrastructure—will be essential as Regional Organizations play an increasingly important role in conflict management while UN engagement declines.

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1 Introduction

While the United Nations has been the lead actor in international conflict management since the end of the Cold War, regional organizations (ROs) have also mounted high-profile responses to civil conflicts and crises in their regions. The African Union (AU) has led a peacekeeping mission in Somalia for almost two decades. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the late 1990s, and has since worked to prevent and resolve conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, and elsewhere in West Africa.

A growing body of research shows that when ROs engage in specific conflict management strategies, they can reduce violence and help implement peace agreements. Gartner (2011) shows that regional organizations are frequently called upon to mediate the most difficult conflicts and that their mediation contributes to longer-lasting agreements. Bara and Hultman (2020) find that larger peacekeeping missions led by regional organizations are associated with reduced government killing of civilians. Breslawski, Cunningham and Fleishman (2024) find that diplomatic and rhetorical actions by ECOWAS lead to reductions in violence in ECOWAS member states.

These studies establish something important, but also something specific: they identify what happens when ROs *act* in particular conflicts. The interventions that draw scholarly and public attention—a peacekeeping deployment, a high-profile mediation effort-take place in a small fraction of the conflicts, and the larger number of potential conflicts, that members of regional organizations experience. Whether the standing institutional capacity to manage conflict produces lower violence across member states *generally*—and not only in the visible cases where an organization engages in high-profile interventions—is a distinct and largely unexamined question. There are, moreover, reasons to doubt that effectiveness in observed interventions scales to a systematic effect. Regional organizations are composed of neighbors with their own stakes in a conflict's outcome (Debre, 2021); they are subject to free-riding and collective-action problems; their most powerful members can block action against a

client or ally; and regional norms of sovereignty and non-interference constrain involvement (Usman and Umar Muhammad, 2024). These constraints block high-profile interventions, but may also prevent organizations from engaging in more low-level conflict management efforts.

Answering whether capacity matters generally requires attention to how much of it organizations actually possess, and here ROs vary enormously. ECOWAS and the AU maintain early warning systems and personnel on the ground to monitor the potential for conflict to break out or escalate, preventive diplomacy mechanisms, infrastructure for organizing sanctions, and standby forces that can deploy quickly. This infrastructure facilitates a quick and sustained response. Many other ROs possess little of it. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has no early warning system, nor any real mechanism, formal or informal, for discussing contentious regional issues. The Caribbean Community has dispute-resolution mechanisms, but ones focused primarily on economic matters, and an early warning system oriented toward natural and weather-related disasters rather than political violence.

In this article, I examine whether countries that are members of regional organizations with greater conflict management capacity experience lower levels of violence. I argue that, while all ROs have incentives to respond to violent conflict in their region, greater infrastructural capacity allows an organization to respond more quickly, deploy multiple tools in coordination, sustain its involvement over longer periods, and coordinate more effectively with other actors—including the United Nations. I am not claiming that more capable organizations always engage, but that organizations equipped to manage conflict do so more effectively when conflicts arise, and that this effective engagement shows up in the overall level of violence their members experience.

This argument leads to one main empirical expectation: states belonging to ROs with greater conflict management capacity will experience lower levels of violence. Statistical analyses using data on 18 regional organizations from 1989 to 2010 provide strong support

for that expectation. Members of higher-capacity organizations experience lower levels of violence than comparable states in less capable ones, a relationship that is robust across multiple model specifications and alternative measures of violence.

The argument and findings in this article have direct implications for understanding conflict management in contemporary international relations. UN peacekeeping is in rapid decline (Campbell and Cunningham, 2025), international mediation in civil conflicts is falling as well (Lundgren and Svensson, 2020), and U.S. funding cuts, deepening Security Council polarization, and geopolitical competition make a reversal of these trends unlikely. If ROs with greater conflict management capacity systematically reduce violence among their member states—as the analyses here suggest—then investment in that capacity is an important part of trying to fill in the gap left by the decline of the UN and of large-scale conflict management efforts.

2 Regional Organizations and Conflict Management

Most regional organizations were formed to coordinate economic activity, such as by lowering trade barriers and encouraging cross-border investment, and/or to address transnational economic issues such as migration, drought, or water rights. Over time, many of these organizations started to take a greater role in political and security issues in the regions where they are based (Haftel and Hofmann, 2017). Scholars examining how ROs affect conflict management have largely pursued two approaches, either examining the effect of specific interventions or examining whether certain types of organizations are more effective.

One body of work examines discrete RO actions and their effects on conflict outcomes. Gartner (2011) finds that ROs often mediate the hardest conflicts—those where negotiations are least likely to produce a sustained ceasefire—and that, once this selection effect is accounted for, RO mediation leads to substantially longer-lasting agreements. Duursma (2020) finds that African mediators, many sent by African ROs, are more effective at me-

diating civil conflicts in Africa than non-African mediators. Breslawski, Cunningham and Fleishman (2024) find that diplomatic and rhetorical tools used by ECOWAS are associated with reductions in violence in member states. These studies establish that regional organizations can reduce violence when they act. But conflict management is broader than a series of high-profile actions, and these studies do not examine the more general effect of organizational capacity across member states.

A second body of work takes organizational characteristics as the explanatory variable, asking how membership in organizations of different types shapes conflict outcomes. Boehmer, Gartzke and Nordstrom (2004) classify international organizations as minimal, structured, or interventionist, and find some evidence that structured and interventionist organizations are associated with fewer militarized interstate disputes among their members. Hansen, McLaughlin Mitchell and Nemeth (2008) examine how IO institutionalization, preference similarity, and democracy among member states affect agreements in contentious territorial, river, and maritime claims, finding that more institutionalized organizations with more democratic members see higher rates of agreement. Both studies, however, concern *interstate* conflict.

The studies closest to this article examine the effect of IO structure on conflict *within* states. Karreth and Tir (2013) and Tir and Karreth (2018) find that members of more Highly Structured Inter-Governmental Organizations (HSIGOs) are less likely to see low-intensity armed conflicts escalate into full civil wars.[1] Lundgren (2016*b*) similarly finds that more institutionalized IOs—again distinguishing minimal, structured, and interventionist organizations—have stronger effects on civil war incidence, operating through both prevention and termination.

These studies advance our understanding of how organizational structure shapes conflict, but they leave two clear gaps. First, while institutionalization captures how structured, le-

[1]HSIGOs can include ROs, but also a variety of other organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

galized, or autonomous an organization is in general; it is not the same as the capacity to manage conflict specifically. An economic organization may be highly institutionalized while possessing little of the early-warning, mediation, or rapid-deployment infrastructure that conflict management requires, and an organization with substantial such infrastructure may not rank among the most institutionalized IOs overall. Second, conflict management success is broader than reduction in the number of conflicts. The studies nearest to this one explain whether a conflict crosses a threshold—whether a low-intensity conflict escalates past full-scale civil war (Karreth and Tir, 2013; Tir and Karreth, 2018), or whether civil war occurs at all (Lundgren, 2016*b*). But the mechanisms through which conflict management operates—identifying escalation early, sustaining engagement, coordinating multiple tools—act on the intensity of violence, not only on its presence or absence. An organization may dampen the severity of a conflict without preventing its onset or altering whether it crosses any particular line. Analyses of whether conflict crosses some violence threshold cannot fully detect that effect.

This article addresses both of these gaps. I argue that what reduces violence is an organization's specific capacity to manage conflict as it arises, which dictates measuring that capacity rather than general structure, and the intensity of violence rather than its incidence or escalation. I examine whether the specific conflict management capacity an organization possesses—rather than its general level of institutionalization—reduces the level of violence its members experience. This approach allows me to identify which organizational characteristics matter most for reducing violence and to assess the overall conflict management effectiveness of regional organizations.

3 How Regional Organizations lead to Reductions in Violence

Regional organizations have strong incentives to work to reduce violence in their region. Intrastate violence can have profound negative consequences for neighboring states, leading to refugee flows, reductions in trade and investment, arms transfers, etc. In some cases, violent conflicts spread, as happened with civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote D'Ivoire in the 1990s. The member states of the RO are most likely to be those that bear these negative consequences of violence in the region, increasing their incentive to respond effectively to violent conflicts and potential violent conflicts in their region.

But ROs vary substantially in their capacity to respond to violent conflicts, both active and potential. ECOWAS is an example of an RO that was founded with a focus on economic issues, but over time it developed substantial institutional capacity to respond to, and work to prevent, violent conflicts.

ECOWAS was established in 1975 to encourage greater regional economic cooperation within West Africa. In 1993, the organization passed a revised treaty in which the member states committed to establish and strengthen institutional capacity for responding to, and preventing, violent inter-state and intra-state conflicts (Afolabi, 2020). In 1999, ECOWAS established the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. To carry this mandate out, the organization created several bodies, including a Council of the Wise, which could engage diplomatically to resolve conflicts, and the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a standing cease-fire monitoring organization that engaged militarily in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote D'Ivoire. The 1999 Mechanism also established the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), a system of zonal observation bureaus reporting to a central monitoring centre at the organization's headquarters in Abuja, which feeds information on emerging conflict risks to ECOWAS decision-making bodies. ECOWARN has been described as the most

developed early warning system among Africa's regional organizations (Ioannides, 2021), and is integrated into the preventive-diplomacy and response apparatus established under the Mechanism. Over the next decade, the organization continued to expand and strengthen its institutional capacity to monitor, engage in preventive diplomacy, and respond with rhetorical, economic, and military tools to both potential and actual armed conflicts (Afolabi, 2020).

What distinguishes ECOWAS is not simply that it established conflict-management institutions, but that those institutions function in practice: its early warning system generates usable information, and its diplomatic and military bodies have repeatedly acted on it. In comparison, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), which is located next door to ECOWAS, took much longer to develop any conflict management capacity. Additionally, even once the organization did establish similar institutions on paper, it has been far less able to use them.

ECCAS was established in 1985 to foster regional economic cooperation, and the organization was largely non-responsive during the civil wars in Rwanda, Burundi, and Zaire/the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, the organization began to establish a peace and security architecture. In 2000, the Central African Peace and Security Council (COPAX) Protocol established the Central African Early Warning Mechanism (MARAC) and the Central African Multinational Force (FOMAC). MARAC was designed along lines similar to ECOWARN, with national bureaus feeding information to a central mechanism, but it has been hindered by mistrust among member states and an unwillingness to share information. FOMAC established a small standing force, but it has been plagued by insufficient financing, equipment, and personnel to engage effectively, and in major regional crises such as the Central African Republic it was the African Union and United Nations, rather than ECCAS, that acted (Ogaraku and Ogaraku, 2021).

3.1 How RO conflict management capacity leads to reductions in violence

Regional Organizations with greater conflict management capacity have the ability to engage more effectively in conflict management. First, they are positioned to identify the potential for escalation early. This includes cases where no violence has yet occurred but a dispute could turn violent, as well as cases where violence is underway and likely to intensify. Early warning systems such as ECOWARN and the AU's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) are built for precisely this task, using networks of field monitors and zonal bureaus to collect information on emerging risks and channel it to organizational decision-makers (Noyes and Yarwood, 2013). Identifying risk early is not the same as acting on it, however, and a recurring finding in this literature is that the warning side of these systems has developed faster than the capacity to convert warnings into response (Wulf and Debiel, 2010; Noyes and Yarwood, 2013). But the incentive structure described above gives ROs reason to act on the warnings their own systems generate, and organizations without this infrastructure cannot identify emerging risks in the first place. Early identification, where it prompts a response, allows conflict management to begin before violence escalates.

Second, organizations with greater conflict management capacity can respond not just with more tools, but with tools deployed in coordination. A large empirical literature shows that individual conflict management strategies — mediation, peacekeeping, sanctions — can reduce violence. A smaller body of work shows that these strategies are often most effective in combination, and that the effect of combining them exceeds what any single tool achieves alone. Beardsley, Cunningham and White (2019) find that mediation and peacekeeping interact: deployed together, they produce greater reductions in battle-related deaths than either does independently. Zhang and Dorussen (2025) find a similar conditional relationship between peacekeeping and humanitarian aid — aid alone can intensify conflict, but paired with peacekeeping, both contribute to reductions in violence. Combining tools in this way requires the institutional ability to sequence and align distinct instruments — to pair a

mediation effort with the credible prospect of peacekeeping, or to time economic pressure to a diplomatic opening — which organizations with greater conflict management capacity are better positioned to do. Indeed, Lundgren (2017) finds that mediation is more effective when conducted by an organization with the capacity to deploy peacekeepers, whether or not peacekeepers are actually deployed. This shows that it is the organization's institutional capacity itself, not only its use in a specific situation, that shapes conflict management effectiveness.

Third, ROs with greater conflict management capacity can sustain conflict management efforts across longer periods of time. There are many conflicts around the world, and outside actors like the United Nations often focus on new crises and conflicts. This can lead to a diversion of resources and attention from existing conflicts that may be at lower levels of intensity. However, conflict management can be a very long term process, and even violent conflicts that appear to be "resolved" for long periods of time can recur. Because of their position in the region and the costs they bear from conflict, ROs have strong incentives to sustain engagement over the long term, and organizations with greater capacity have the institutional resources to do so. This staying power matters not only because conflict management takes time, but because it makes an organization's commitments more credible. As Reid (2017) argues, an actor's leverage in conflict management derives not only from its material capabilities but from its credibility — and a disputant weighing whether to honor an agreement responds differently to an organization that will remain present and engaged for years than to one likely to turn its attention elsewhere. This credibility leverage, distinct from capability, is something sustained engagement builds and episodic involvement cannot.

Finally, organizations with greater conflict management capacity can coordinate more effectively with other actors working in the same conflicts. ROs frequently operate alongside the United Nations and, in Africa, the African Union. ECOWAS, for instance, has worked in concert with both in conflicts such as Côte d'Ivoire (Schori, 2014). This coordination is not merely additive. Schumann and Bara (2023) find that UN and regional peacekeeping opera-

tions are most effective in combination, because they bring different strengths: UN missions are better suited to the multidimensional tasks of peacekeeping, while regional forces are more effective in combat roles, so that together they reduce battle-related deaths more than either does alone. More broadly, effective cooperation among international organizations tends to produce better conflict management outcomes than independent action (Fleishman, 2025). An organization with the capacity to coordinate — to share information, align mandates, and sustain a presence alongside other actors — is better positioned to realize these gains.

The ability of ROs with greater conflict management capacity to respond quickly and effectively to violent conflicts in member states, sustain engagement over long periods of time, and to coordinate with other international organizations should mean that conflict management efforts are more successful in their member states. Effective conflict management means that some disputes that otherwise would have escalated to armed conflicts do not, those armed conflicts that do occur would be shorter and less violent, and wars that are resolved are less likely to recur. Overall, this results in lower levels of violence. This is the empirical expectation I test in this article:

Hypothesis: Countries that are members of ROs that have greater conflict management capacity will experience lower levels of violence than those that are not members of ROs or members of ROs with less conflict management capacity.

This hypothesis focuses on organizational capacity to engage in conflict management rather than in specific interventions that ROs undertake. It therefore rests on the assumption that organizations with greater capacity will generally use it when conflicts arise or threaten to within member states. This is a reasonable assumption for two reasons. First, the incentive structure described above gives ROs strong reason to act: member states bear the direct costs of regional violence — refugee flows, trade disruption, conflict spillover — and so are likely to use infrastructural capacity to try to manage regional conflicts when they

occur. Second, the effect of capacity does not necessarily depend entirely on its being used in any given case. As noted above, Lundgren (2017) finds that an organization's capacity can shape conflict outcomes even when it is not deployed — the credible prospect of action, not only action itself, influences the behavior of conflict parties.

4 Empirical Analyses

4.1 Measuring Conflict Management Capabilities of ROs

The argument advanced in this article focuses on the effect of the standing conflict management capacity of ROs, rather than specific interventions these organizations undertake. The claim is not that capable organizations always act, but that organizations equipped to manage conflict tend to do so more effectively when conflicts arise, and that this shows up in the level of violence their members experience generally. Testing that claim requires a measure of what ROs are equipped to do, present in a given year whether or not the organization is actively engaged in some intervention.

The measure also needs to be specific to conflict management. The theoretical argument points to a particular set of capabilities—the ability to identify escalation early, to bring diplomatic, economic, and military tools to bear in coordination, to sustain engagement over time, and to coordinate more effectively with other actors–as what reduces violence. By this argument, it is the capacity to manage conflict as it arises, rather than organizational scope or structure in general, that the measure of capacity should pick up.

The International Organization Conflict Management (IOCM) dataset (Lundgren, 2016*a*) meets both requirements, and I use it for the analyses that follow. The IOCM records the conflict management capabilities an organization possesses in each year, so it measures standing capacity for conflict management not specific interventions. And its components correspond directly to the elements of conflict management identified above: it codes each organization's capacity in six areas—diplomatic intervention, economic sanctions, and field

missions (primarily the authorization and deployment of peacekeepers), together with early warning systems, confidence-building measures, and a collective security mechanism. The dataset covers 21 "peace-brokering" international organizations from 1945 to 2010. I exclude three—the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, and NATO—leaving 18 regional organizations (a list is provided in the Appendix).[2]

The diplomatic interventions capability, economic sanctions capability, and field mission capability categories each contain two ordinal variables. One variable indicates the degree of institutionalization of the capability, ranging on a scale from zero to four, with "0" meaning "has no institutional structure in place to support a particular capability" and "4" meaning "has established institutional bodies to provide specialized administrative and operative support for a given capability, together with long-ranging experience of using it" (Lundgren, 2016*a*, p. 204). The second variable, "authorization," measures the institutional level at which the specific capability can be authorized. It also ranges from zero to four, with "0" indicating "an IO is not mandated to employ the relevant capability" and "4" indicating "authority has been fully delegated, implying that supranational officials can independently authorize its usage" (Lundgren, 2016*a*, p. 205). The measures of a collective security mechanism, confidence building measures, and early warning systems are all dichotomous indicators of whether or not the organization possesses that capability.

This measure of conflict management capacity picks up not whether an organization has established conflict management institutions on paper, but whether it has developed capacity those institutions can actually exercise. To show this difference, I return to the example of ECOWAS and ECCAS from the theory. Those two ROs are quite similar on factors that might drive conflict management capacity: both are African economic communities that were established during the Cold War, both are building blocks of the African Union's security

[2]The United Nations is not an RO, and indeed virtually every state in the world is a member. The Commonwealth of Nations is also not an RO. While it has somewhat more limited membership than the UN, its members stretch across multiple continents. NATO, meanwhile, is a collective security organization that was established to counter external threats and functions quite differently from the ROs described here.

architecture, and ECCAS modeled its core conflict management institutions directly on those of ECOWAS, designing MARAC along the lines of the ECOWARN early warning system and FOMAC as a standby force on the model of ECOMOG. What separates them is not primarily the set up of the institutions but its implementation, and the IOCM shows that difference.

Figure 1 traces the diplomatic, economic, and field mission capacity of the two organizations from 1989 to 2010. For each, I have added the two ordinal variables together to give a range from 0 to 8. The panel below the figure shows whether the organizations had an early warning system, collective security mechanism, or confidence building measures in that period. Figure 1 shows the pattern described in the theory. ECOWAS developed steadily across the period, and by 2000 had high diplomatic capacity, a relatively high score on field mission capability, and some economic sanctions capability. Additionally, ECOWAS had a collective security agreement throughout the 1989-2010 period, confidence building measures beginning in 1993 and an early warning system beginning in 1999.[3] ECCAS, by contrast, registers no conflict management capacity at all until 2000, when its peace and security architecture began to take formal shape. However, even after institutions like MARAC and FOMAC were established, ECCAS plateaus at low values across all three capabilities — diplomatic and field-mission capacity of 2, economic capacity of 1 — and never approaches ECOWAS, whose diplomatic capacity reaches 7 and field mission capacity 5 by that year.

Figure 2 shows how the diplomatic, economic, and military capabilities of all 18 organizations included in the data have changed in the 1989-2010 period. It shows that organizations such as ECOWAS, the African Union, and the European Union greatly increased their conflict management capacity in this period, while organizations like SADC and IGAD have seen relatively small increases. Other organizations, including the Andean Community and

[3]The IOCM leaves ECOWAS's collective security mechanism uncoded for 2008–2010. The figure carries its last recorded value (2007, present) forward through these years. In the aggregate capacity measure used in the analysis, these missing values are instead set to zero — a conservative choice that marginally understates ECOWAS's capacity in those three years.

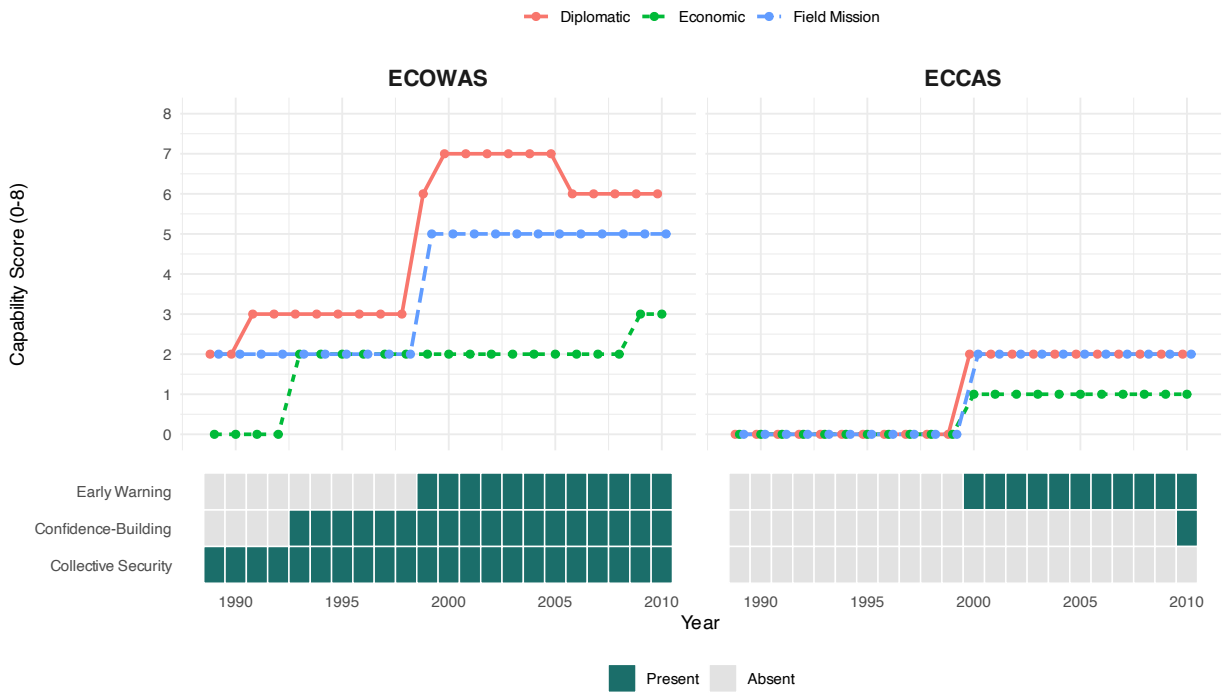

Figure 1: Development of ECOWAS and ECCAS Conflict Management Capacity (1989-2010)

SAARC have no conflict management capacity across the entire period.

I use two measures of conflict management capacity. The first is a count of the number of areas–diplomatic, economic, field mission, early warning, confidence building, and collective security–within which an organization has capacity. To create this variable, I have turned the measure of diplomatic, economic, and field mission capacity into dichotomous variables indicating whether the organization has any capacity in that area (i.e. either the authorization or institutionalization variables are coded as greater than 0). This variable ranges from 0-6. This count measure captures the breadth of tools available to the organization and thus its ability to deploy coordinated responses using multiple instruments—a key mechanism identified in the theoretical argument above. Organizations with capacity across more areas can combine diplomatic engagement with economic pressure, or deploy field missions alongside mediation efforts, which existing research suggests produces better outcomes than single strategies alone.

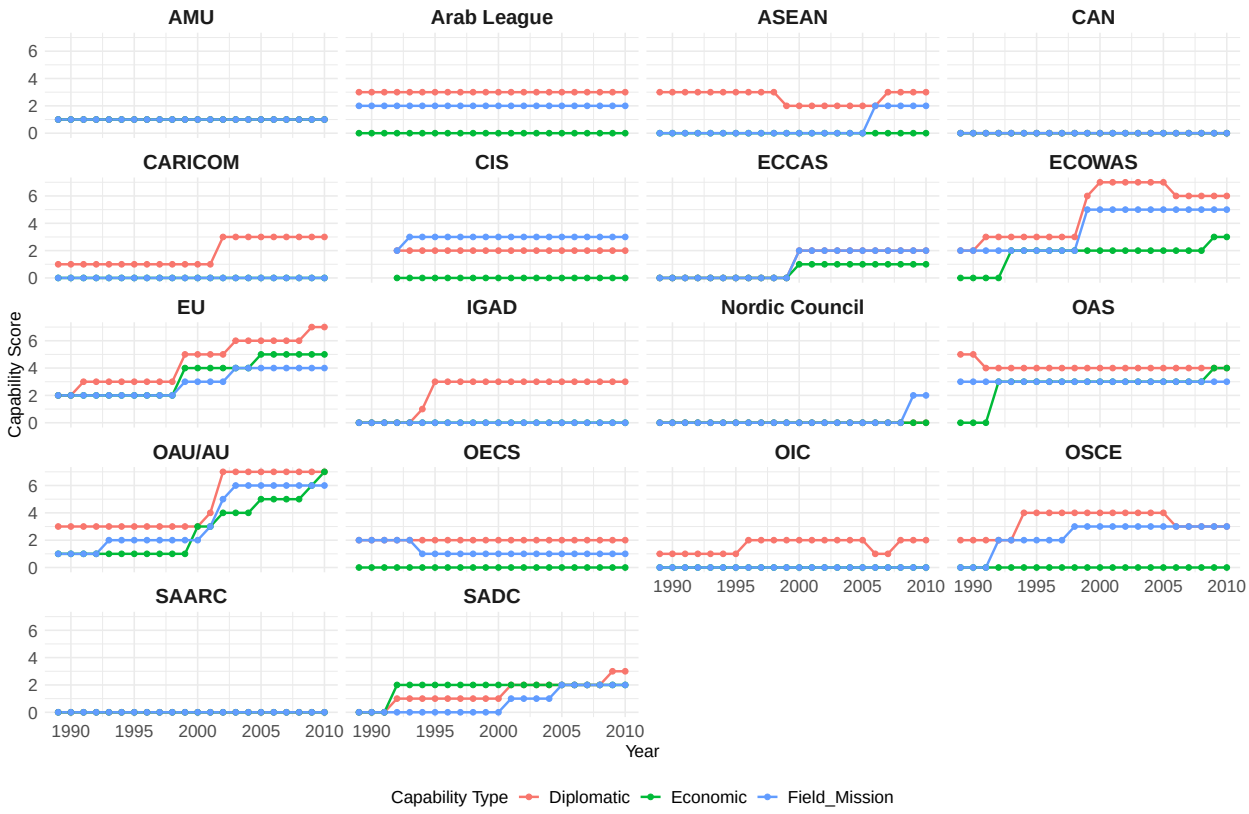

Figure 2: Diplomatic, Economic, and Military Capacity for 18 Regional Organizations (1989-2010)

The second measure aggregates the total conflict management capacity across all six areas. When I code the variable this way, I am weighting diplomatic, economic, and field mission capacity higher than early warning systems, collective security measures, and confidence building measures, since the diplomatic, economic, and field mission capabilities variables vary from 0 to 8 and the other three are dichotomous. This weighting reflects the more detailed information captured by the ordinal scales for these three core capabilities, allowing the measure to capture not just whether organizations possess tools, but the degree of institutional infrastructure and sophistication within each capability area. However, any weighting is by nature somewhat arbitrary, which is why I use two measures of conflict management capacity.

Using the Correlates of War IGO data (Pevehouse et al., 2020) to identify each state's RO memberships, I match the IOCM capacity variables to every RO a country belongs to, producing a country-year dataset of the conflict management capacity of each state's ROs. Because some countries belong to several organizations and others to only one or none, I take, for each measure, the value of the most capable RO to which a country belongs in a given year. The logic is that the most capable RO will typically lead the conflict management effort, so its capacity is the most relevant.[4]

To see how these variables are measured in actual cases, we can compare Togo, Kenya, Laos, and Nepal in 2000. Togo is a member of ECOWAS, the organization with the highest conflict management capacity score in 2000. That year, ECOWAS has a score of "7" on the diplomatic capacity variable, "2" on economic capacity, "5" on the field mission capacity, and "1"s on each of the three dichotomous variables, This means it has a score of "6" on the conflict management capacity count measure and "17" on the aggregate measure. Kenya, like virtually every African state (including Togo), is a member of the OAU/AU, and is also a member of IGAD. Of the two, the OAU/AU is the more capable in 2000 — IGAD

[4]In a robustness check, described below with tables in the Appendix, I take the sum of the conflict management capabilities of the two most capable organizations to which a state belongs.

scores below it on both measures — so its capacity determines Kenya's values. That year, the OAU/AU had a score of "3" on diplomatic capacity, "3" on economic capacity, and "2" on field mission capacity, and is not coded as having a collective security mechanism, confidence-building measures, or an early warning system. These give Kenya a score of "3" on the count measure and "8" on the aggregate measure. Laos is a member of ASEAN, which in 2000 is coded as "2" on diplomatic capacity and as having confidence building measures, but "0"s on everything else, giving Laos scores of "2" on the count variable and "3" on the aggregate measure that year. Nepal, meanwhile, is a member of SAARC, which has scores of zero on all the capacity variables in 2000, giving Nepal a score of zero on both measures of conflict management capacity for that year.

4.2 Measuring levels of violence

The statistical analyses examine how these measures of conflict management capacity affect levels of violence within countries. To measure levels of violence, I use data from the UCDP Georeferenced Event Data (GED) (Sundberg and Melander, 2013), aggregated to the country year. This provides a measure of the number of deaths due to state-based internal armed conflict in every calendar year. Importantly, this includes some years that do not reach 25 battle-related deaths, so it allows me to compare countries that are not currently in armed conflict in terms of their level of violence.[5]

Battle-related deaths are a broad measure of conflict management success, because they represent an outcome through which many aspects of conflict management may register.

[5]The dependent variable counts deaths from state-based internal armed conflict. Because the GED traces the events of each qualifying conflict dyad across all of its active years — including years in which a dyad causes fewer than 25 deaths, the threshold that defines an active conflict — as well as the years preceding and following them, it registers state-based violence in country-years below the active-conflict threshold, distinguishing low-level violence from its absence rather than coding both as zero. Because the GED simultaneously tracks one-sided and non-state violence, any country experiencing organized violence of any kind is under close observation, so a recorded zero there is informative. The violence the measure cannot capture is that of conflicts that never reach the threshold in any year, and so never enter the data at all — countries such as Gabon or Zambia that have had no qualifying conflict of any type.

Preventing a dispute from escalating, shortening an armed conflict, holding down its intensity, and keeping a terminated conflict from recurring all reduce the number of people killed in a given country-year, so a measure of the level of violence captures the net effect of conflict management across these channels. Because the GED is event-based, this measure is also sensitive to violence below the 25-death threshold used to define an active conflict: a continuous count registers a conflict held in check or reduced in intensity to a low-level of fighting, where a binary measure of onset would record only the crossing of the threshold. The level of violence is thus a more sensitive measure of both prevention and resolution. One thing this measure does not pick up is deaths due to one-sided or non-state violence. However, I check the results against two broader measure of organized violence in the Appendix, and describe the results briefly in the Additional Analyses section below.

Figure 3 presents a histogram of the number of battledeaths, by year, for the full global sample for 1989-2010 (the period in which the IOCM and UCDP GED data overlap). I have removed zeroes and log-transformed the number of battle-deaths, due to a large number of zeroes and a heavy skew for the data. There are 3,352 out of 4,192 country-years with zero battle-deaths, while there are 187 country-years with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths. There are 8 country-years with 10,000 or more battle-deaths and 3 with more than 20,000. The two country-years with the most battle-deaths are both in Ethiopia–49,698 in 1990 and 24,358 in 1989.

4.3 Modeling Approach

To properly test the hypothesis that countries that are members of ROs with greater conflict management capacity will experience lower levels of violence than others, all else equal, I need to deal with the fact that the baseline risk of violence varies substantially across countries and across time within countries. I am interested in cross-sectional variation–I anticipate that two countries with similar baseline risks of violence will have different levels of violence based on the conflict management capacity of the ROs to which they belong. I am also

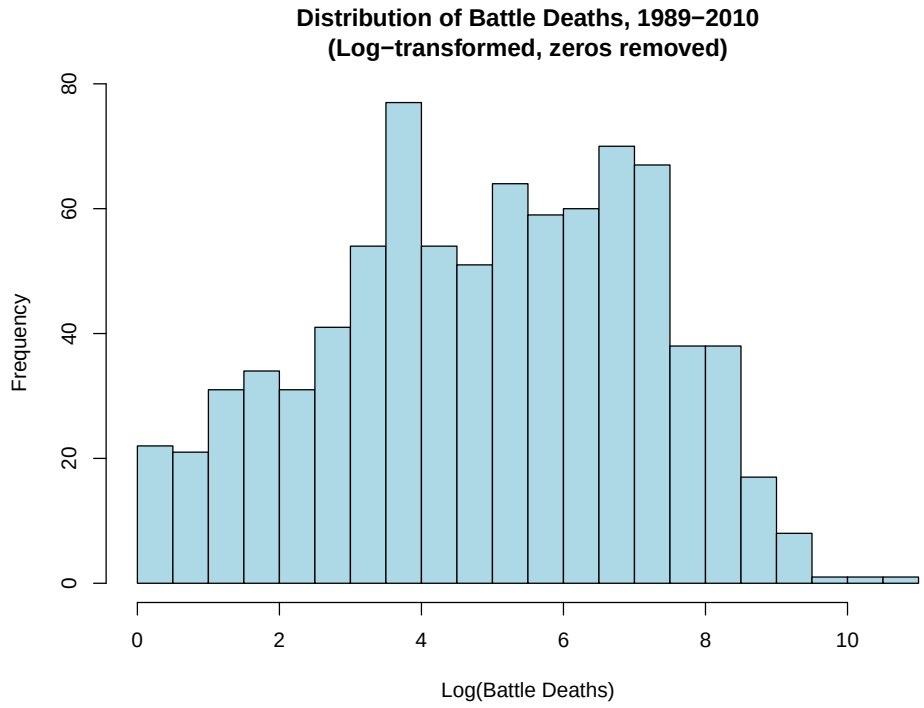

Figure 3: Histogram of Battledeaths 1989-2010, log-transformed, with zeroes removed

interested in variation over time, since RO conflict management capacity can change over time, and as ROs gain capacity I would expect violence levels within countries to decline.

To examine both of these, I conduct analyses with, and without, country-level fixed effects. The models with country-level fixed effects examine how changes in conflict management capacity affect violence in the country over time, while the models without fixed effects allow for cross-sectional comparison. The time period is 1989-2010 (when both the UCDP-GED and IOCM data are available).

I include a set of control variables that should affect the baseline levels of violence in each country-year, as well as a lagged dependent variable and a time trend in all models. These controls serve two purposes: adjusting for confounding factors that affect both RO capacity and levels of violence, and improving precision by accounting for known predictors of civil conflict. This allows me to compare how RO conflict management capabilities affect countries with similar risks of internal violence. Four of the control variables do not vary much within country over time, so I exclude them from the fixed effects models. The first

variable is the country's infant mortality rate from the World Bank World Development Indicators data. It is generally well established that countries at lower levels of economic development are more prone to civil violence, and the infant mortality rate is a common proxy for economic development. The second variable is a measure of country population (log-transformed), also from the World Development Indicators. Country population is one of the variables with the most consistent (positive) effects on levels of armed conflict.

The third control variable is the level of democracy in the country, as measured by the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index. The V-Dem variable measures the level of democracy in the country on a 0 to 1 scale (Coppedge et al., 2025; Pemstein et al., 2025). The final variable is from the Ethnic Power Relations data project and measures the percentage of the country's population that is made up of ethnic groups that are excluded from political power.[6] Ethnic groups that are excluded from political power are more likely to rebel (Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010), and countries that have a higher percentage of their population excluded from power are more likely to experience armed conflict (Buhaug, Cederman and Gleditsch, 2014).

I also include several controls in both the country fixed-effects and non fixed-effects models that do vary over time. First, I include dichotomous variables measuring whether there is a UN peacekeeping operation (PKO) or Special Political Mission (SPM) present in the country in the year.[7] PKOs and SPMs are both UN peace operations, and they are present in many conflict-affected countries. Adding these variables allows me to examine whether ROs with higher conflict management capacity impact levels of violence, controlling for the role of the UN in these countries.

Second, I add a variable, from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data (Hyde and Marinov, 2012), measuring whether there was any national-level

[6]These data were obtained from the GROW-UP platform (Girardin and Vogt, 2015).

[7]These variables are taken from the United Nations Peace Mission Mandate dataset version 2.2 (Hellmüller, Tan and Bara, 2024).

(presidential, legislative, or both) election in the year. Elections can be very contentious times in countries, and there is frequently electoral violence.

Finally, I include a one-year lagged measure of deaths due to state-based intrastate violence (a lagged DV) in each model, as well as a variable measuring the year. Adding the lagged DV is important because ROs often develop conflict management capacity in regions with a history of armed conflict. By including the lagged dependent variable, I can measure whether ROs with greater conflict management capacity contribute to reductions in violence. The year variable controls for global trends in battle-related deaths over time (such as the decline in armed conflict in the 2000s) that may be correlated with changes in conflict management capacity. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analyses in the full analysis sample.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Battle Deaths	167.09	1093.51	0.00	49,698.00	3994
CM Capacity (t-1)	7.88	5.96	0.00	21.00	3994
CM Capacity Count (t-1)	3.23	1.97	0.00	6.00	3994
UN PKO Present (t-1)	0.11	0.31	0.00	1.00	3994
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.06	0.23	0.00	1.00	3994
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	40.94	35.76	2.10	274.00	3446
Log Population (t-1)	8.97	1.67	5.19	14.10	3446
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	0.49	0.28	0.01	0.92	3531
Excluded Population % (t-1)	0.14	0.20	0.00	0.91	3534
Election (t-1)	0.25	0.43	0.00	1.00	3994

Note: Statistics calculated for the full analysis sample with non-missing values on key variables.

For each of the two measures of conflict management capacity, I conduct two models: one with country fixed effects and one without. In the models without fixed effects, I use a negative binomial model: battle-death counts are heavily overdispersed, and the negative binomial accommodates that overdispersion directly. In the models with country fixed effects, I instead use a Poisson model estimated by pseudo-maximum likelihood. The fixed-effects Poisson estimator is consistent under correct specification of the conditional mean alone and

does not require the counts to be equidispersed, and I cluster standard errors by country to account for overdispersion and within-country correlation (Wooldridge, 1997, 1999). I use it in preference to the conditional fixed-effects negative binomial, which is not a genuine fixed-effects estimator in that it does not fully control for stable, unit-specific heterogeneity (Allison and Waterman, 2002). The fixed-effects models are a demanding test, since capacity changes only gradually within countries; if the association holds under them that indicates it is not an artifact of stable differences between countries.

A more fundamental concern with the analysis is endogeneity: regional organizations may build conflict management capacity in anticipation of, or in response to, violence within their member states, so that capacity is partly shaped by the outcome it is meant to explain. Two features of the analysis address this endogeneity. First, conflict management capacity, as measured here, is slow-moving institutional infrastructure — built up over years or decades through treaty revision, the establishment of specialized bodies, and the gradual accumulation of operational experience — rather than a response calibrated to recent violence in a particular member state. It is therefore unlikely to track the year-to-year variation in violence that the analysis examines. Second, I conduct additional analyses (described in the Additional Analyses section) in which I regress capacity on its own history and on recent violence. I find that it is almost entirely explained by its own past, with no detectable country-year response to prior deaths; the results are also stable whether capacity is measured at a one-, two-, or three-year lag. This does not rule out that persistently violent regions invest more in capacity over the long run, but the data do not generally show the specific pattern that capacity increases in response to recent violence.

4.4 Results

Table 2 reports the results of the four models using the two measures of conflict management capacity described above (with, and without, country fixed effects). The results show support for the hypothesis. The coefficient on conflict management capacity is negative in all four

Table 2: Conflict Management Capacity and Intrastate Violence

	Count Measure		Additive Measure	
	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects
CM Capacity, Count (t-1)	−0.310**	−0.247**		
	(0.123)	(0.123)		
CM Capacity, Additive (t-1)			−0.082	−0.077**
			(0.053)	(0.031)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.211***	−0.207	0.998**	−0.134
	(0.459)	(0.319)	(0.437)	(0.320)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.845*	−0.067	1.066**	−0.046
	(0.476)	(0.265)	(0.522)	(0.261)
Intrastate Deaths (t-1)	0.001***	0.000***	0.001***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	0.023***		0.020**	
	(0.008)		(0.009)	
Log Population (t-1)	0.867***		0.845***	
	(0.132)		(0.125)	
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	−5.226***		−5.843***	
	(0.852)		(1.070)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	2.015***		2.211***	
	(0.664)		(0.662)	
Election (t-1)	−0.336	0.051	−0.294	0.050
	(0.364)	(0.159)	(0.394)	(0.157)
Year	−0.049**	−0.023	−0.039**	−0.011
	(0.021)	(0.020)	(0.018)	(0.019)
Constant	95.299**		74.948**	
	(41.414)		(35.061)	
Num. Obs.	3546	1887	3546	1887

Note: Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. Cross-sectional columns are negative binomial; fixed-effects columns are Poisson pseudo-maximum-likelihood with country fixed effects. $^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

models and statistically significant in three of the four, the exception being the additive measure in the non-fixed effects model.

The results on the count model are particularly strong: the coefficient is negative and highly significant both with and without fixed effects. In the cross-sectional model, each additional area in which a country's most capable RO has capacity is associated with a 27% reduction in expected battle-deaths (an incidence-rate ratio of 0.73). The within-country estimate is nearly as large: under country fixed effects, where identification comes only from changes in capacity over time within the same country, each additional area of capacity is associated with a 22% reduction (an incidence-rate ratio of 0.78). The similarity between the within-country and cross-sectional IRRs suggests that the association is not driven by stable differences in levels of violence and organizational membership between countries — the same increase in capacity is associated with lower violence whether one compares different countries or the same country as its ROs develop.

While the additive measure is significant only with country fixed effects, that is the more demanding test. The additive measure captures the depth of institutional capacity organizations have to deploy diplomatic, economic, and military tools, and the within-country estimate implies that each additional point on this scale is associated with roughly a 7% reduction in expected battle-deaths (an incidence-rate ratio of 0.93). While this reduction is smaller than a one-unit reduction in the count measure, the magnitude of the additive measure (which has a theoretical range from 0 to 27 and an observed range from 0 to 22) is much larger. And, because this IRR is from the model with fixed effects, it shows the effect of organizations building deeper capacity over time.

The control variables in Table 2 generally perform as expected. Infant mortality rate, log population, and the percent of the country's population made up of an ethnic group excluded from power are all positive and significant, while V-Dem Polyarchy is negative and significant—all consistent with existing literature on civil conflict.

The variables measuring UN PKO and SPM presence are positive and significant in the

two models without country fixed effects[8], but negative and insignificant in the models with them. The positive results are likely driven by selection: PKOs and SPMs go to conflict-affected countries which, when compared cross-sectionally to all other countries in the world, have higher average levels of violence. The presence of an election is negative in both cross-sectional models and positive in the two fixed-effects models, but insignificant in all of them.

The lagged measure of intrastate deaths is positive in all four models. This shows that countries with violence in one year are more likely to have it in the next. The year variable is negative in every model, and significant in the models without fixed effects. This reflects the general trend that levels of armed conflict and violence broadly decreased for the first twenty-five years or so after the Cold War ended. This is an important control variable, because, as Figure 2 shows, the conflict management capacity of organizations on average increased over this period as well.

To examine the substantive effects of conflict management capacity, Figure 4 uses the negative binomial model (without fixed effects) from Model 1 in Table 2 (which uses the count measure of conflict management capacity) to generate predicted numbers of battle-deaths at different levels of conflict management capacity, holding the control variables at their mean, the lagged measure of intrastate battle-deaths at zero, and the year variable at 2000. The blue line represents point estimates of predicted battle deaths, while the shaded ribbon indicates 95% confidence intervals. The gray histogram shows the distribution of conflict management capacity observations in the data, with frequency counts displayed on the right y-axis.

Figure 4 reveals a strong negative effect of increased conflict management capacity on battle deaths. When conflict management capacity is measured as "0", the model predicts approximately 30 battle deaths per country-year. As conflict management capacity increases to its maximum observed value (6), predicted deaths decline to approximately 5 per country-

[8]The SPM measure is only significant at the 0.1 level in the model using the count measure.

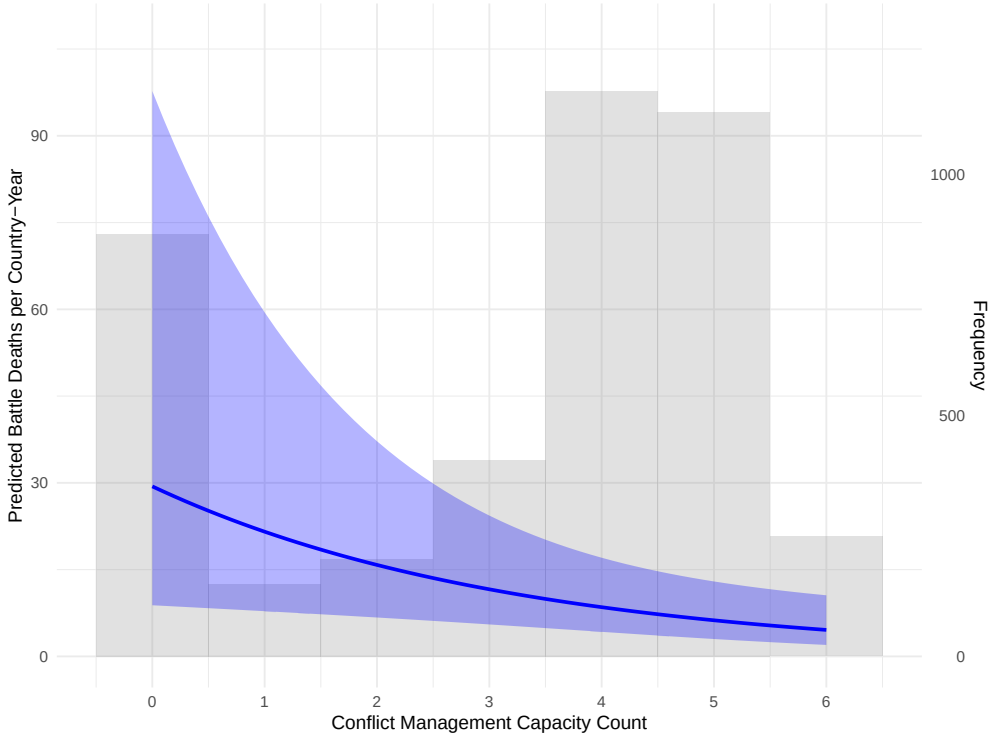

Figure 4: Predicted Intrastate Battle-deaths by Conflict Management Capacity (count measure)

year, representing an 84% reduction. While there are relatively few country-years with a "6" on conflict management capacity , there are many with "4" or "5", and Figure 4 shows that an approximately 71% reduction in predicted battle-deaths occurs between 0 and 4.

4.5 The effect of individual ROs

The cross-sectional analyses in Table 2 and substantive effects in Figures 4 show that countries with similar profiles — in population, regime type, economic development, the access to power of large ethnic groups, and prior histories of violence — can experience very different levels of violence depending on which regional organization they belong to. In addition, the fixed effects models show that countries generally experience lower levels of violence when the most capable RO to which they belong has greater conflict management capacity. Together, these strongly support the argument that ROs with greater conflict management capacity contribute to lower levels of violence in their member states.

The capacity measures in Table 2 do not show which specific organizations drive this pattern. To address this question, I next examine the effect of membership in individual ROs. I focus on four African regional organizations that the literature identifies as active in conflict management: the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, and SADC. Treating each organization's presence as a simple indicator does something the capacity measures cannot: it shows which organizations the association is concentrated in, and it does not depend on how the underlying capacity index is scored or weighted.

Because I focus on four African ROs, I conduct analyses of the effect of organizational membership in both a global sample and an Africa-only sample. In the global sample, I include the AU, to which virtually every African country is a member. I exclude it in Africa, and so the African sample allows me to compare levels of violence among states that are members of different African ROs.

The membership models compare members of each organization to the omitted baseline of non-members, holding the same controls as before. Because the set of included organizations differs across the two samples, so does that baseline. In the global model, which includes all four ROs, each coefficient is measured against states belonging to none of the four — a group composed almost entirely of non-African states, since nearly every African country belongs to the AU. In the Africa model, the baseline is African states that do not belong to ECOWAS, IGAD, or SADC, and so is predominantly made up of the members of ECCAS and the Maghreb organizations. ECCAS members–including Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC–experienced some of the highest levels of violence in the 1989-2014 period covered here. So, the sub-regional coefficients describe how membership relates to violence relative to other African states, many of them in regions of comparably high baseline risk.

Table 3 reports negative binomial models for the global and Africa samples, with the count of state-based intrastate battle-deaths as the dependent variable — the same outcome and estimator as the capacity models above, so the membership results are directly comparable to them. Standard errors are clustered by country. These models extend through 2014 rather

than 2010, because they require only the Correlates of War IGO membership data, which runs to 2014, and not the IOCM capacity measures. I do not include country fixed effects, because organizational membership is essentially time-invariant within countries over this period.

Table 3: Regional Organization Membership and Intrastate Violence (1989-2014)

	Global Sample	Africa Sample
OAU/AU Member (t-1)	1.676**	
	(0.669)	
ECOWAS Member (t-1)	−0.994	−2.057***
	(0.783)	(0.675)
SADC Member (t-1)	−3.440***	−3.212***
	(0.921)	(0.754)
IGAD Member (t-1)	−1.663**	−1.329***
	(0.833)	(0.493)
Intrastate Deaths (t-1)	0.001***	0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	0.010*	0.028***
	(0.006)	(0.007)
Log Population (t-1)	0.874***	0.643***
	(0.082)	(0.112)
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	−4.076***	−0.692
	(0.799)	(1.877)
Excluded Population % (t-1)	4.925***	1.199*
	(1.458)	(0.647)
Election (t-1)	0.132	−0.499
	(0.352)	(0.417)
Year	−0.025	0.010
	(0.024)	(0.030)
Constant	46.303	−23.124
	(47.431)	(58.910)
Num. Obs.	4210	1325

Note: Both models are negative binomial without fixed effects; the dependent variable is the count of state-based intrastate battle-deaths. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses; coefficients are on the log scale. $^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

The results in Table 3 generally show that membership in these three sub-regional organizations is associated with lower levels of violence. Membership in IGAD and SADC is negative and significant in both the global and Africa sample. Membership in ECOWAS

is negative in both samples, but only significant in the Africa sample. The AU coefficient, meanwhile, is positive and significant in the global model. However, because virtually every state in Africa is a member of the AU, this variable is essentially an Africa dummy, and it picks up the fact that African countries generally experienced higher levels of violence in this time period.

There are a few caveats for each of these effects. For SADC, while it has the largest coefficient of any RO in both samples, it also comprised a region–Southern Africa–with very little armed conflict in the 1989-2014 time period. While the controls included should deal with this to some degree, it is difficult to fully determine how much of the SADC effect is driven by that low baseline level of violence and how much by the organization's conflict management capacity.

For IGAD, the opposite issue arises. IGAD's members are the most violent group in the data: the typical IGAD country-year involves substantial battle-deaths where the typical country-year elsewhere involves none, and the Horn of Africa over this period saw some of the largest conflicts in the world.[9] IGAD's negative coefficient emerges only once the controls are included; without them, IGAD membership is associated with more violence, not less. The controls account for some of the conditions — authoritarian rule, large excluded populations, deep poverty — that make IGAD's members violent, leaving a negative residual. This suggests that membership in IGAD results in lower levels of violence than would be expected given the characteristics of its member states, but it also means that this result depends on the controls capturing the sources of the Horn's violence. Additionally, the IGAD effect is identified from only eight countries, a thin basis for the cluster-robust standard errors.

The results on ECOWAS are mixed across the two samples: the coefficient is sizable,

[9]The median number of deaths in a country year for an IGAD member is 41, as compared to 0 for ECOWAS, SADC, and the baseline African country, while the mean for IGAD country-years is 829, versus the baseline of 208.

negative, and significant within Africa, but insignificant in the global sample. The global null likely reflects the comparison group — ECOWAS members are pooled against a largely non-African set of states whose observable characteristics understate the violence ECOWAS members experience — so the within-Africa comparison, against states of broadly similar risk, is the more appropriate test. There, ECOWAS countries are compared primarily against ECCAS and the Maghreb, and the ECOWAS–ECCAS contrast is the one drawn in the theoretical discussion: ECOWAS members fare markedly better than the Central African states whose organization adopted similar conflict management institutions on paper but never made them effective. This is not a difference in typical levels of violence — the median country-year in every one of these groups involves no battle-deaths — but in the frequency and severity of the large conflicts that do occur.

Taken together, these models show that membership in ROs the literature identifies as engaging in conflict management–ECOWAS, IGAD, and SADC–is associated with lower levels of violence. These dichotomous RO indicators are blunt, and so the associations could be affected by model specification, etc. However, the patterns in Table 3, together with the results in Table 2, show using three different measures that ROs with conflict management capacity are associated with lower levels of violence in member states.

5 Additional Analyses

I conduct a series of additional analyses to further examine the relationship between RO conflict management capacity and levels of violence. The first set of additional analyses examine the effect of conflict management capacity on different measures of violence. The DV in Table 2 is the number of deaths due to state-based intrastate violence, essentially a measure of battle-related deaths in the year. In Table A2, I replace that measure with the total number of deaths from state-based violence. This measure also includes deaths resulting from interstate wars, such as the 1998-2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In Table A3

I use a cumulative measure of deaths, which includes all deaths from organized violence (whether state-based, non-state, or one-sided violence) in the year. Both of these measures are from the UCDP-GED (Sundberg and Melander, 2013). For the analyses in Table A3 I exclude country-year observations where cumulative deaths exceed 500,000, because the extreme values from the Rwandan genocide (and their lagged values) were preventing the models from converging.

Across Tables A2 and A3, the conflict management capacity measures are negative in all eight models, and statistically significant in seven of the eight. The only model where capacity is not significant is the additive measure in the cross-sectional (without country fixed effects) model in Table A3. This shows that the results in Tables 2 and 3 are not driven by the measure of violence used, and that the association between greater conflict management capacity and violence reduction is broader than intrastate battle-deaths.

The second set of analyses examines an alternative operationalization of RO conflict management capacity for each country. The analyses in Table 2 use the conflict management capacities of the most capable RO to which a country belongs. However, some countries are members of two capable organizations, while others belong to only one. In Africa, for example, countries in ECOWAS are also AU members and thus have two capable organizations that can intervene, whereas countries in a less capable subregional organization (such as ECCAS) are more reliant on the AU alone. To examine whether the combined capabilities of two organizations matter, Appendix Table A4 replicates the analyses from Tables 2 using the sum of the two highest-capacity ROs to which a country belongs, rather than the single most capable organization.

The analyses using the two most capable ROs show somewhat stronger effects of conflict management capacity than those presented in Table 2. In Table A4, the conflict management capacity measures are negative and significant in all four models, including the additive measure without country fixed effects (where it was insignificant in Table 2). This suggests that the results in Table 2 are not driven by the measure being constructed around one RO.

In fact, it may be that countries in two ROs with conflict management capacity–such as ECOWAS and the AU–see greater reductions in violence.

The third set of analyses examine the role of time in further detail. The analyses in Table 2 include a year variable, which is important because RO conflict management capacity generally goes up over time (or stays the same), and the period of 1995-2010 saw significant reductions in violence over time. To more directly examine the role of time, in Table A5 I re-run the analyses from the four models in Table 2, replacing the linear year variable with a cubic time polynomial and with year fixed effects. This gives eight new models. The conflict management capacity variables are negative in all eight models, and significant in seven. The one exception is the additive measure without country fixed effects and with year-fixed-effects. Interestingly, the additive measure reaches significance in the cross sectional model using the cubic polynomial. Importantly, both measures retain significance in the models that include both country and year fixed effects, and two-way fixed effects are a demanding specification for an analysis like this where RO conflict management capacity is slow to change.

The fourth set of analyses seeks to deal with the potential for endogeneity in RO conflict management capacity, in which ROs develop capacity in response to the anticipation of violent conflict. In the analyses in Table 2, the conflict management capacity variables are lagged by one year to deal with the potential for reverse causality. In Table A6, I use a two-year and three-year lag of capacity to examine whether the results are robust to different lag structures. This should help alleviate potential endogeneity whereby ROs increase capacity in response to conflicts. The models with the two and three year lags show the same pattern as in Table 2–the count measure is negative and significant in all six models, and the additive capacity measure is negative and significant in the three models with country fixed effects, and negative and insignificant in the three models without them.

To further address this potential endogeneity, in an unreported test I find that RO conflict management capacity is highly persistent: regressing capacity on its own one-year lag,

with country and year fixed effects, yields an autoregressive coefficient of 0.94 for the additive measure and 0.77 for the count, indicating that capacity in a given year is largely determined by its own recent history. More directly relevant to the endogeneity concern, once this persistence is accounted for, lagged battle-deaths do not predict current capacity: the coefficient on prior violence is small and statistically insignificant under both measures, and remains so when a second lag of violence is included. This is consistent with the claim that conflict management capacity is slow-moving institutional infrastructure rather than a response calibrated to recent violence in particular member states, and it is reflected in the stability of the results across the one-, two-, and three-year lag structures reported in Table A6.

Finally, I run a set of analyses to examine whether the effect of conflict management capacity found in Table 2 is driven by one specific component from the IOCM data–such as diplomatic capacity, economic capacity, early warning system, etc. I re-code conflict management capacity (both the count and additive measures) to exclude one of the six components, and then re-run the four models from Table 2 with each re-coded measure. This results in a large number of regression models, and Table A7 presents just the coefficients and p-values for the conflict management capacity variables.

Across these twenty-four models, the capacity coefficient is negative in every one. For the count measure it remains statistically significant in eleven of its twelve specifications — the sole exception being the confidence-building measure under country fixed effects — while for the additive measure it is significant in all six fixed-effects specifications, though generally not in the cross-sectional analysis, the same pattern seen in Table 2. This consistency shows that no single component is driving the results in the analysis and suggests that the relationship between conflict management capacity and violence is not driven by any specific tool, but reflects the capacity of ROs broadly.

6 Conclusion

Regional Organizations have strong incentives to work to minimize regional violence because their member states will bear most of the spillover costs of conflict in the region. There have been highly visible instances of successful RO action, such as ECOWAS' response to the disputed election in The Gambia in 2017 and the AU's cooperation with the UN in the peacekeeping mission in Darfur.

While these successes are important, studies of individual cases cannot determine whether they represent a general pattern or simply the most visible instances where ROs happened to succeed. In addition, ROs vary substantially in the capacity to prevent, contain, and de-escalate violent conflicts. When ROs have greater institutional capacity for conflict management–mechanisms of preventive diplomacy, the ability to authorize sanctions and deploy military forces, effective early warning systems that collect information and disseminate it to the right actors, and so on–they can identify the potential for escalation early, organize effective, sustained responses, and coordinate more effectively with other actors such as the UN. ROs that lack this capacity cannot mount the same response. If institutional capacity for conflict management is what makes ROs effective, then the violence their members experience should depend on how much of it they have — and that is a claim about systematic variation across many organizations, not the success or failure of any single case.

The analyses in this article examine the relationship between organizational capacity and violence across regional organizations from 1989-2010. The results show that ROs with greater conflict management capacity are systematically associated with lower levels of battle-related deaths among member states. This relationship holds across multiple model specifications and alternative measures of violence, demonstrating that these organizations lead to reductions in violence more generally.

These findings suggest that there would have been more violence in countries that are members of organizations like ECOWAS, SADC, and the AU if these organizations had not developed their conflict management capacity. This increase in violence could have

manifested in additional armed conflicts, longer lasting conflicts, more destructive wars, and/or more frequent conflict recurrences.

The impact of ROs on violence identified here supports the focus of the United Nations in recent years on "local ownership" and "regionalization" in conflict management and peacebuilding efforts. This focus is likely to be increasingly important in the future, as the UN role in conflict management is almost certain to diminish. The UN has been the leading actor in conflict management efforts for most of the post-Cold War period. However, UN peacekeeping, which has been the main way the organization has led responses to armed conflicts throughout this period, is in rapid and profound decline (Campbell and Cunningham, 2025), and international mediation in civil conflicts is declining as well (Lundgren and Svensson, 2020). These trends have been continuing for at least a decade, and are likely to accelerate as a result of U.S. funding cuts to the UN, continued polarization in the UN Security Council, and increased competition among UN member states.

Regional Organizations could be well positioned to fill in some of the gap left by the UN's diminished role if they continue to invest in and engage in conflict management. However, this optimistic scenario faces two significant challenges. First, there remains a gap in our understanding of whether RO conflict management success is dependent on UN support, or whether these organizations can really engage successfully on their own. Existing analyses of the effect of ROs (including the analyses in this article) largely examine a period where the UN was involved to some degree in most, if not all, of these conflicts. Further research focused on isolating the effect of RO action from that of the UN would help to understand how effectively ROs could fill in this gap.

Second, the continued ability of some of these ROs to engage in conflict management is in serious doubt. ECOWAS has been one of the most active organizations in this space, but is currently paralyzed following several coups in the region and the withdrawal of three member states–Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger–from the organization. In 2023, SADC deployed a military mission to the DRC, which was designed to replace MONUSCO, the longest-lasting

and largest multidimensional UN peacekeeping force in the post-Cold War era. The SADC mission failed and its mandate has since ended, while MONUSCO's own withdrawal has stalled. The African Union, meanwhile, has shown little ability to respond to the civil war currently causing a humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan.

Despite these challenges, successful conflict management is almost certainly going to require ROs working to prevent and resolve armed conflicts and reduce violence in their member states. Civil wars in Sudan and Syria show how destructive wars can be when international actors support opposing sides as opposed to coordinating to try to de-escalate conflicts and promote resolution. ROs can play a pivotal role in reducing violence and armed conflict, but only when they possess and maintain the conflict management capacity to engage effectively. The findings in this article suggest that continued investment in organizational capacity—diplomatic mechanisms, military capabilities, and institutional infrastructure—will be essential if regional organizations are to fill the gap left by declining UN engagement.

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Appendix

Table A1: Regional Organizations Included in Analysis

Acronym	Organization Name
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
Arab League	League of Arab States
CAN	Andean Community
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
Nordic Council	Nordic Council
OAS	Organization of American States
OAU/AU	Organization of African Unity / African Union (OAU/AU)
OECS	Organization of Eastern Caribbean States
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SADC	Southern African Development Community

Table A2: CM Capacity and State-Based Total Deaths

	Count Measure		Additive Measure	
	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects
CM Capacity, Count (t-1)	−0.306***	−0.302*		
	(0.117)	(0.156)		
CM Capacity, Additive (t-1)			−0.090*	−0.108**
			(0.047)	(0.041)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.144**	−0.653*	0.937**	−0.453
	(0.455)	(0.391)	(0.433)	(0.331)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.925*	−0.632	1.128**	−0.627
	(0.479)	(0.453)	(0.518)	(0.462)
Total Deaths (t-1)	0.001***	0.000***	0.001***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	0.021***		0.019**	
	(0.007)		(0.008)	
Log Population (t-1)	0.859***		0.846***	
	(0.125)		(0.118)	
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	−5.941***		−6.423***	
	(0.735)		(0.918)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.943***		2.148***	
	(0.697)		(0.683)	
Election (t-1)	−0.377	−0.246	−0.340	−0.251
	(0.328)	(0.241)	(0.351)	(0.249)
Year	−0.060***	−0.017	−0.043**	0.003
	(0.018)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.017)
Constant	117.837***		83.874**	
	(35.691)		(35.073)	
Num. Obs.	3546	1931	3546	1931

Note: Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. The dependent variable is state-based total deaths (interstate, intrastate, and extrasystemic). Cross-sectional columns are negative binomial; fixed-effects columns are Poisson pseudo-maximum-likelihood with country fixed effects.$^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

Table A3: CM Capacity and Cumulative Total Deaths

	Count Measure		Additive Measure	
	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects
CM Capacity, Count (t-1)	−0.184*	−0.203**		
	(0.112)	(0.100)		
CM Capacity, Additive (t-1)			−0.056	−0.085***
			(0.040)	(0.028)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	0.898**	−0.413	0.806**	−0.252
	(0.393)	(0.317)	(0.393)	(0.284)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	1.115**	−0.564	1.248**	−0.544
	(0.483)	(0.369)	(0.506)	(0.372)
Cumulative Deaths (t-1)	0.001***	0.000***	0.001***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	0.019***		0.018***	
	(0.006)		(0.007)	
Log Population (t-1)	0.990***		0.996***	
	(0.101)		(0.098)	
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	−5.099***		−5.354***	
	(0.669)		(0.770)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.400**		1.483**	
	(0.588)		(0.590)	
Election (t-1)	−0.290	−0.228	−0.274	−0.240
	(0.278)	(0.192)	(0.288)	(0.199)
Year	−0.065***	−0.013	−0.054***	0.008
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.017)
Constant	125.825***		103.529***	
	(30.103)		(31.193)	
Num. Obs.	3544	2347	3544	2347

Note: Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. The dependent variable is cumulative total deaths from organized violence. Observations with extreme outliers (>500,000 deaths) are excluded to ensure model convergence. Cross-sectional columns are negative binomial; fixed-effects columns are Poisson pseudo-maximum-likelihood with country fixed effects.$^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

Table A4: CM Capacity Summed Across the Two Most Capable ROs

	Count Measure		Additive Measure	
	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects
CM Capacity, Count Top-2 (t-1)	−0.175**	−0.178**		
	(0.083)	(0.071)		
CM Capacity, Additive Top-2 (t-1)			−0.058*	−0.060***
			(0.033)	(0.021)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.310***	−0.177	1.098**	−0.126
	(0.506)	(0.299)	(0.469)	(0.308)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.855*	−0.076	1.144**	−0.024
	(0.500)	(0.271)	(0.528)	(0.269)
Intrastate Deaths (t-1)	0.001***	0.000***	0.001***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	0.023***		0.022**	
	(0.008)		(0.010)	
Log Population (t-1)	0.900***		0.884***	
	(0.121)		(0.117)	
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	−5.454***		−5.678***	
	(0.877)		(1.027)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.838***		1.827***	
	(0.638)		(0.643)	
Election (t-1)	−0.266	0.029	−0.225	0.042
	(0.356)	(0.162)	(0.384)	(0.159)
Year	−0.042**	−0.016	−0.032*	−0.009
	(0.020)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Constant	80.146**		61.228*	
	(40.139)		(36.178)	
Num. Obs.	3546	1887	3546	1887

Note: Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. The capacity measure is the sum across the two highest-capacity regional organizations to which a country belongs (count and additive versions). Cross-sectional columns are negative binomial; fixed-effects columns are Poisson pseudo-maximum-likelihood with country fixed effects. $^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

Table A5: Flexible Time Controls

	Count Measure		Additive Measure	
Time control	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects
Linear trend	−0.310**	−0.247**	−0.082	−0.077**
	(0.123)	(0.123)	(0.053)	(0.031)
Cubic trend	−0.332***	−0.234*	−0.115**	−0.078**
	(0.125)	(0.122)	(0.058)	(0.030)
Year fixed effects†	−0.228**	−0.245**	−0.030	−0.070**
	(0.100)	(0.125)	(0.045)	(0.030)

Note: Each cell is the coefficient on CM capacity from a separate model with the full control set and lagged dependent variable (controls omitted). Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. $N = 3546$ in the cross-sectional columns and 1887 in the fixed-effects columns in all rows. Cross-sectional columns are negative binomial; fixed-effects columns are Poisson pseudo-maximum-likelihood. Linear and cubic specifications use a centered year term; the year fixed-effects row replaces it with year dummies in the cross-sectional columns. †In the year fixed-effects row, the fixed-effects columns include both country and year fixed effects (two-way). $^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

Table A6: Capacity at Alternative Lags

	Count Measure		Additive Measure	
Capacity lag	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects	Cross-Sectional	Fixed-Effects
$t-1$	−0.310**	−0.247**	−0.082	−0.077**
	(0.123)	(0.123)	(0.053)	(0.031)
N	3546	1887	3546	1887
$t-2$	−0.277**	−0.333**	−0.076	−0.091**
	(0.130)	(0.145)	(0.054)	(0.042)
N	3547	1801	3547	1801
$t-3$	−0.302***	−0.385**	−0.060	−0.105**
	(0.114)	(0.180)	(0.048)	(0.047)
N	3548	1801	3548	1801

Note: Each cell is the coefficient on CM capacity from a separate model; only the capacity lag varies across bands, with all other covariates held at $t-1$ and the full control set included (controls omitted). Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. Cross-sectional columns are negative binomial; fixed-effects columns are Poisson pseudo-maximum-likelihood with country fixed effects. The $t-1$ row reproduces Table 2. $^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

Table A7: Leave-One-Out Robustness: CM Capacity with Each Component Removed

	Cross-Sectional		Fixed-Effects	
Specification	Coef.	p	Coef.	p
Count measure (0–6)				
Full measure	−0.310	0.012	−0.247	0.044
Drop: Diplomatic	−0.365	0.017	−0.268	0.059
Drop: Economic	−0.391	0.007	−0.327	0.011
Drop: Field Mission	−0.420	0.014	−0.315	0.027
Drop: Collective Security	−0.353	0.008	−0.302	0.032
Drop: Confidence-Building	−0.284	0.058	−0.268	0.101
Drop: Early Warning	−0.301	0.015	−0.258	0.066
Additive measure (0–22 observed)				
Full measure	−0.082	0.121	−0.077	0.013
Drop: Diplomatic	−0.146	0.182	−0.109	0.020
Drop: Economic	−0.119	0.054	−0.121	0.004
Drop: Field Mission	−0.152	0.132	−0.100	0.020
Drop: Collective Security	−0.085	0.109	−0.076	0.013
Drop: Confidence-Building	−0.076	0.155	−0.073	0.018
Drop: Early Warning	−0.086	0.114	−0.084	0.011

Note: Each row re-estimates the model using a CM capacity measure that omits the named component, taking the maximum across each country's regional organizations. Cross-sectional columns are negative binomial; fixed-effects columns are Poisson pseudo-maximum-likelihood with country fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by country; p-values from clustered standard errors. Coefficients are not directly comparable across rows: dropping a component can change which organization is the capacity-maximizing one for a given country-year, so a shift in magnitude reflects re-selection of the binding organization as well as that component's contribution.