“Policing the Periphery: A Theory of Border Control from the Central Asian Context, 1991-2006”

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COMMENTS WELCOME

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Abstract: If borders are—as IR theory suggests—rational responses to external threats, then why do states often fail to cooperate with one another when their borders are threatened and violated by third-parties (such as extremists, rebels, and weapons smugglers)? This paper provides an answer to this question by examining the post-Soviet Central Asian state system. The paper tests and defends the proposition that state-building processes determine state preferences and priorities on border security. This explains why states that share a border often take such different and mutually exclusive approaches to border security, even if cooperation and coordination against a third party threat would leave both states better off.
Scarcely a week goes by without a major news story about rebels, extremists, and smugglers of contraband slipping across poorly guarded interstate boundaries. In some of Africa’s most distressed states, rebels ferry weapons back and forth across remote boundaries taking successive turns in launching conflict and eroding the authority of states. While rebels, extremists, and smugglers find ways to cooperate across state borders, states often seem unable to cooperate with one another to deter such third-party threats. Why do some states cooperatively manage their borders while others forego mutually beneficial cooperation?

This paper answers this question by linking state-building theory to border security in new states. I advance two theoretical propositions. First, in new states, state-building dynamics determine border policy. This is a counterpoint to the implicit assumption in much of IR theory that borders are institutions which react to externally determined threats. Second, I propose that divergent state-building dynamics in contiguous states lead to the implementation of incompatible preferences of border control along a shared boundary. I argue that such incompatibility can trigger conflict and escalation among two bordering states even in cases where International Relations theory would predict cooperation.

In advancing this argument, the paper attempts to correct an implicit assumption in IR that interstate borders are necessarily a rational response to the outside environment. Rather, I suggest that many interstate borders often create dysfunctional and conflict-prone outcomes because state preferences on securing boundaries are determined by domestic institutional imperatives. The building blocks of this argument
come from state-building institutionalism, a body of work in comparative politics that focuses on how states build and expand institutions of control over their territories.

I proceed with a two-step series of case studies set in Central Asia’s newly independent states. To test the proposition that state-building dynamics determine border policy, I examine three contiguous states—Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. All of these states faced the daunting and mutual problem of cross-border extremism, yet they adopted very different responses to this seemingly objective security threat. To test the interactive effects of divergent border policies, I conduct another series of case studies on three paired borders in the area. These cases demonstrate the deleterious consequences of mutually exclusive border control policies on international security.

The case studies in this paper fulfill important criteria of social inquiry. They allow us to control for multiple variables and to test existing explanations. Although the cases cannot provide a definitive confirmation of my state-building claims, they construct a new avenue of research for IR theory. This venture should not be underestimated. The lack of a focus on IR in borders is rather embarrassing. Although IR cannot exist as a discipline in the absence of state borders, there is no sustained debate on how borders are formed, institutionalized, and protected.

The Central Asian Context, 1991-2005

Central Asia’s states became independent on the heels of Soviet collapse in December 1991. The moment of independence was part punctuated euphoria and part tremendous uncertainty. Of all the former-Soviet republics, Central Asia’s states seem to have embraced independence most reluctantly. Central Asia’s leaders faced the daunting
task of extending authority over vast territories inhabited by multi-ethnic populations as well as the task of securing international borders that were previously internal administrative lines [see maps 1 and 2].

Soon after independence, Central Asian leaders identified two issues as threats to regional stability: undelimited borders and rising militant activity. The new borders were neither demarcated nor delimited. As a result, the states could not be sure of the point at which their sovereignty effectively ended.

A second problem was the threat of cross-border militancy, especially in the Ferghana Valley, a tri-border region where Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan’s borders intertwine. In the wake of independence Central Asian leaders spoke of the danger posed by groups and forces that they considered an extremist threat to the state. A number of groups, such as the Islamic Rennaisance Party, the Hizb-u Tahrir, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan were identified as clandestine transnational actors (CTAs) who organized and operated across the tri-border region in violation of state laws. Although these Islamic groups often had varied motives and different bases of membership, Central Asia’s leaders identified them as a critical threat to state power and stability in the entire region.

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As such, Central Asian leaders pledged to deal with the mutual problems of border delimitation and CTAs via swift, multilateral ventures. In other words, cooperation to affix borders and police them against militants was seen as a positive-sum undertaking.

Yet by the late 1990s, many of Central Asia’s borders were in distress. Despite the presence of armed border units along most boundaries, incidents of contraband smuggling and extremist cross-border incursions were on the rise. More often than not, the region’s states failed to cooperate to end these third-party threats, preferring instead to escalate tensions over issues of border control. The Uzbek and Kyrgyz states narrowly averted several near-wars over the status and security of their border.

This stands in sharp contrast to other paired borders in the region where states pooled their efforts to provide security against contraband and cross-border militancy. While the Uzbek and Kyrgyz states preferred to go near the brink instead of fighting militants, the Kyrgyz and Chinese managed to attain spectacularly high levels of cooperation in matters of border security despite similar security problems and environmental constraints.

This uneven distribution of cooperation and conflict along otherwise similar boundaries in Central Asia requires explanation. In the next section, I outline conventional explanations and argue why they are wrong. I then outline my alternative theory on state-building and border security and test my hypotheses.

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Problems with the Conventional Wisdom

Explanations for conflict and cooperation along Central Asian borders can be grouped into three theoretical categories: neo-realist; decentralized cooperation theory; and territorial indivisibility. These approaches have much to say about conflict and cooperation along international borders. Yet none make predictions that are borne out in the Central Asian context.

NEO-REALISM

Realist observers argue that the end of the Cold War has created a multipolar system in Asia that is bound to result in regional insecurities. Central Asia’s newly independent states now have to provide for their own security in a region that is effectively encircled by greater powers. One or more of Central Asia’s states border on powerful regional players that include Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran. This situation is exacerbated by one of Central Asia’s own states; Uzbekistan possesses Central Asia’s most superior army and the largest population.\(^4\) It is, thus, in a position to dominate the region and threaten the security of its neighbors.

In such a regional context, Central Asia’s states are unlikely to cooperate. Militarily weak states are likely to display a rush to the trenches. Their emphasis will be on creating viable and defensible borders to deter attack and to ensure their security against other states as well as any third-parties that threaten their security (such as smugglers and cross-border militants).\(^5\) Stronger states will attempt to use their

\(^4\) Uzbekistan’s population (26.1 million) is 5 times larger than Kyrgyzstan’s and Uzbekistan annually spends 15 to 20 times as much as the Kyrgyz state on the military.

\(^5\) This realist perspective on boundaries is taken from other regional contexts. See, for example, John Mearsheimer, “The Impossible Partition,” *New York Times* (January 11, 2001); John Mearsheimer and
boundaries as offensive fronts. They will militarize and fortify them using them as
deterrents, springboards for territorial conquest, or as points of escalation in order to
coerce and blackmail their neighbors.

Although realist explanations for the lack of cooperation and militarization along
Central Asia’s borders appear plausible when the region is viewed as a whole, these
explanations become unsustainable when specific events and particular borders are
considered. While Uzbekistan did militarize its borders with combat units, it also called
for neighboring states to do the same along all shared boundaries. In other words, it did
not call for cooperation but instead called for mutual militarization, a strategy that realism
cannot readily explain. More confounding for realist explanations, however, is the
substantial cooperation over border policing that occurred along other Central Asian
borders. Kyrgyzstan and China demilitarized and bilaterally policed their shared border
despite China’s military capacity to go at it alone. In short, realism seems to explain
Uzbekistan’s border militarization and fortification but has a difficult time explaining
cooperation along other Central Asian borders.

TERRITORIAL INDIVISIBILITY

A plausible explanation for border security in Central Asia would thus have to
account for variation in unilateral versus cooperative strategies. One possible
explanation comes from the literature on territorial indivisibility. Much of this work

Stephen Van Evera. “Redraw the Map, Stop the Killing,” New York Times (April 4, 1999); and John

6 Such an action could be perceived by other states as evidence of offensive and hostile intent.

7 In the context of third-party (non-state) threats such as terrorism, Pape argues that the best defense is
deterrence, punishment and vigilant border control. See, Robert Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide
argues that most modern inter-state conflict is not based on a struggle for power or survival. Instead, states fight over territory.\(^8\) Vasquez finds that when two or more states are involved in a territorial dispute, the threat of conflict is high.\(^9\) In the presence of such territorial disputes, power politics and militarization will characterize that particular border. A “hard” border—characterized by closure, tension, and unilateral militarization—could prove a useful signal of resolve in the context of a dispute. In the absence of territorial disputes, we should see permissive conditions for cross-border cooperation and joint policing.

Yet, the empirical record in Central Asia yields results that are exactly the opposite of what this literature would expect. The region’s most appreciable cooperation in matters of border security generally occurred along disputed borders. China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan began to cooperate over matters of border security previous to the resolution of their territorial dispute, a fact that is doubly surprising given the violent history of that boundary.\(^10\) Uzbekistan, which did not have a history of territorial

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disputes with its neighbors, was the most aggressive in militarizing and unilaterally patrolling its border.11

DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION

Decentralized cooperation theory in IR attempts to identify the conditions under which states will overcome the barrier posed by security dilemmas and cooperate to achieve mutual benefit.12 As states with shared boundaries have the possibility of iterated cooperation and interaction, decentralized cooperation theory should be able to explain why some Central Asian states are cooperating with their neighbors while others are unilaterally militarizing them.

Since the presence of a mutually perceived threat—cross-border militancy—is present along most of Central Asia’s borders, we would expect this to be an easy test for the theory to pass. Shared borders where there is a high possibility or incidence of militant threat should over time become zones of cooperation. The payoff for cooperation in such iterated situations is mutually high, while the payoff for not cooperating becomes less appealing. Yet they theory fails to pass this easy test. The presence of third-party militants, even in the absence of other disputes, does not necessarily lead to states cooperating over time. Despite obvious benefits, some of Central Asia’s states prefer not to cooperate along their mutual borders.

11 Note that delimitation and territorial disputes are distinct. Delimitation refers to a lack of clarity on the local position of the boundary and often affects small tracts of land. Territorial disputes refer to specific and overlapping claims on (usually large) pieces of territory by states.
A Theory of State-building and Border Security

In this section I lay out a theory based on state-building to explain variation in border security strategy in new states. I argue that state-building policies in newly independent states determine how the new state will defend its border. State-building refers to the attempt by states to expand political authority and monopoly of rule over inherited territory.¹³ The attempt to expand authority to newly inherited territories and build functioning institutions generates particular preferences and perceptions of borders. In other words, border control strategies are generated from the inside-out and not from objective threat emanating from the international environment. I begin with three general assumptions about state-building and borders. These are followed by a hypothesis and testing in three new Central Asian states.

Assumption 1: All states desire secure boundaries. While the desire for a secure border may be a constant, two things vary: a) the capacity of states to secure this; and b) their preferences about the optimal means of providing this security. States may deploy a variety of strategies along their borders in order to accomplish their preferred tasks. These strategies may include militarization and deployment of combat units, stationing of professional border guards, construction of physical barriers or the use of high-tech tools to process flows (i.e., smart borders).¹⁴

Assumption 2: New states face unique challenges in extending authority over inherited territory. Newly independent states must actively extend their authority from their capitals out to their peripheries. This entails performing a gamut of institutional tasks that established states often take for granted: providing services to their populations; protecting and policing society; writing new laws and enforcing them; conducting surveillance and taxation of economic flows; determining the institutional form of the political realm; etc. These challenges may be particularly severe, especially where new states include multi-ethnic,

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¹³ This definition is borrowed from a variety of work on state-building. See, for example, Jeffrey Herbst, States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lesson in Authority and Control (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Joel Migdal, State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); and Charles Tilly, Capital, Coercion and European States, 990-1992 (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).

¹⁴ Peter Andreas, “Redrawing the Line: Borders and Security in the Twenty-first Century”.


**Assumption 3:** \textit{Borders lower the costs of maintaining sovereignty.} As institutions that delineate the end of one state’s sovereignty and the beginning of another, borders allow states to extend their authority to defined lines with the promise of non-interference from the outside.\footnote{James A. Caporaso, “Changes in the Westphalian Order: Territory, Public Authority and Sovereignty,” \textit{International Studies Review}, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2000), pp. 1-28; Patricia M. Goff, “Invisible Borders: Economic Liberalization and National Identity,” \textit{International Studies Quarterly}, Vol. 44 (2000), pp. 533-562; Stephen Krasner, \textit{Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Friedrich Kratochwil, “Of Systems, Boundaries and Territoriality: An Inquiry into the Formation of the State System,” \textit{World Politics}, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1986), pp. 27-52.} However, borders are more than reminders of the sovereignty norm. They are also local level institutions where states may choose to physically perform tasks to further their aims of state-building or reaffirm their sovereignty. Customs officials who tax goods, border guards who patrol against illegal entry and exit, and combat units that act as lines of first defense are such examples.

Taken together, these assumptions allow us to explore the link between state-building policy and a state’s orientation toward its borders. The prediction which follows from these assumptions is that state-building policies pursued at the moment of independence in individual states will generate stable preferences on border security. These preferences, in turn, determine the strategies that states will implement in order to secure their boundaries. In short, state-building imperatives cause states to tailor border control and security strategy in order to lower the costs of extending central authority.

**Hypothesis 1:** \textit{The state-building strategy a state pursues at the moment of independence determines border security preferences.}
In order to test this hypothesis, I proceed with the following steps: First, I specify standards of measurement for the independent variable (state-building) in the form of two indicators. This avoids ad hoc measurement and allows me to gather data in a systematic and replicable way. Second, I test this hypothesis in three Central Asian states to ensure proper variation in both state-building strategy and the outcome variable (unilateral versus cooperative border policing). Third, I assess competing hypotheses, which claim that border security is a function of externally generated threats.

The two indicators I use to measure state-building are coercion and extraction. Coercion and extraction are commonly practiced by states to expand rule. I argue that each has particular consequences for how states come to define threat and consequences for how states perceive the role of their borders in filtering out that threat.

Coercion refers to strategies that states use to extend their rule that involves either the actual use or threatened use of violence to target persons. Forms of coercion include incarceration, expropriation, humiliation, and the public issuance of threats. Because coercion can accumulate and take many forms, I measure coercion using the following rubric: a) the state’s willingness to restrict and monitor political life; b) the state’s ability to restrict and monitor political life; and c) extent to which state institutions are centralized (versus decentralized). I code coercion with a simple dichotomous measure: high or low. For example, a state that is unable to monitor political life and unable or unwilling to centralize political authority at the expense of regional political leaders is classified as a “low” coercion state.

Extraction refers to the drawing from subject populations the means of perpetuating state structures. Extractive institutions are the foundation of administration:

without revenues states cannot survive. Extractive strategies are necessarily intrusive and involve, “centralization of the fiscal apparatus, territorial control, political and economic decisions about target groups, the acquisition of information, and the design and implementation of collection mechanisms and enforcement procedures.”

Extraction is measured simply by gauging the state’s preferred mode of generating revenue in national territory. This may involve relatively low and selective impact extraction such as collecting taxes on flows (customs and VAT) or high impact, across the board extraction such as control over foreign exchange controls and nationalization of prices.

These two mechanisms of state-building are central to the expansion of state authority over a given territory. Moreover, the particular strategies of coercion and extraction that states practice will also have deterministic outcomes on border control strategy. A state that practices substantial coercion on political life can be expected to use its borders as a means of lowering the costs of implementing that coercion. Aggressive control at points of exit from the national territory can prevent potential challengers of state authority from entering the territory as well as deprive those who challenge state authority of an easy exit option. If that state also relies on a command economy in order to extract revenues, then it has a doubly vital interest in controlling its boundary. Work in comparative politics demonstrates that those states that survive by autarchic economies and foreign exchange controls necessarily have huge incentives in controlling the flow of goods in (and especially) out of their borders.

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On the other hand, states that lack the ability (and willingness) to project their authority to their outlying territories are unlikely to invest substantial costs in surveillance, micro-management, and direct control of their borders. This concurs with work by Herbst which posits a link between state capacity and boundary politics in the African state system. Herbst convincingly argues that Africa’s states prefer to legitimate and secure their border by crafting international norms of non-interference and participating in international organizations which legitimate their borders, instead of bothering to actually police and enforce their boundaries on the ground.\textsuperscript{21} In the Central Asian region, we might expect that states low in coercive ability (and hence unable to control CTA’s across their borders) will place an emphasis in delimitation and in obtaining bilateral or multilateral recognition of their border. This will satisfice their security and sovereignty even if their ability to control their boundaries and practice border surveillance is anemic.

However, this paper represents a major point of departure from Herbst’s work by examining a state system in which state-building policies are not uniform but varied. While Herbst explains how low capacity states attempt to expand authority to their outlying territories, this paper crafts a theory of border control and state-building that explains variation in state-building (IV) and modes of border security (DV).

\textbf{A Tale of 3 “Stans”}

To test the hypothesis, this section examines the link between state-building policy and border security in three contiguous Central Asian states: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. I proceed by measuring extractive and coercive modes of

\textsuperscript{21} Herbst, \textit{States and Power in Africa}. 
state-building by looking at policies pursued by the core, central leadership structures in each state. These measurements are taken in the initial years of independence. To code state-building policy for each state, I use the existing literature on state-building and regime transition in Central Asia as well as assessments of Central Asia’s economies and reform politics that are published by IOs and NGOs invested in the region. These indicators allow me to create a state-building typology for each of the three states examined. I use this typology to predict state preferences on border policy. I then examine the empirical record on matters of border security to determine whether or not these preferences actually result in border policy.

KYRGYZSTAN “THE TRADER”

The Kyrgyz Republic borders on both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Uzbek and Tajik minorities reside in its densely populated southern border regions and the Kyrgyz state was the site of the first ethnic riots in Central Asia during the transition to independence. The state inherited a non-continuous border (Uzbek sovereign enclaves within its territory) as well as two territorial disputes (one with China and another with Tajikistan along its southwest border in the Isfara valley region). Faced with a difficult geography and a shattered economy, the Kyrgyz state attempted to survive by pursuing strategies of liberalization that would bring in revenues from trade flows while attracting foreign aid, investment, and technical assistance.

Coercion: Despite the crudeness of the description, the Kyrgyz state can be categorized as institutionally weak. Scholarship on Central Asia indicates that the ability of the Kyrgyz state to coerce and implement central authority is highly anemic in at least

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two different spheres: the security forces in the Kyrgyz state were, in the years following independence, largely ineffectual in providing domestic security. Moreover, the authority of the central state was largely neutralized by regional governments that often implemented their own agendas in political matters with little resistance from the center.

**Extraction:** In extracting most revenues, the Kyrgyz state performed miserably. Income tax made up approximately 1% of the GDP. In the initial years following independence, government revenues seem to have been drawn largely from grants, interest on bank lending, and the sale of water and electricity to neighboring states. Hampered by a lack of effective revenue collection and weak auditing institutions, the Kyrgyz state instead focused its efforts on collecting revenues that involved a minimum of state effort. Customs taxes, for instance, are easier to collect as they can be obtained at designated ports of entry and border posts. Yet the Kyrgyz state did not pursue an aggressive customs policy in order to meet requirements for membership in the WTO. By July 1997, it passed a new customs code which allowed raw material to be imported duty-free, and it created Free Economic Zones (FEZ) from which goods could be exported duty-free. It also adopted a uniform customs rate for remaining taxable goods at

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25 Even after a restructuring of the fiscal apparatus in 1998, the Kyrgyz state’s revenues from income tax made up 1.2% of the budget.

10%. The initial objective of the Kyrgyz state in matters of extraction thus seems to have been to facilitate a liberalization of the economy that would increase trade volume and customs revenues while attracting donor assistance and investment.27

Faced with the task of extending authority over a fractured territory, the Kyrgyz state chose a mode of state-building that I label the “trader path”. Unwilling to forcibly centralize its political authority over outlying regions and expand the domestic security apparatus to all sections of the country, the Kyrgyz state instead chose to take the path of economic liberalization that would guarantee both trade revenues and economic aid and investment.

This has particular effects on Kyrgyz central state preferences toward border control and security. The primacy of early economic liberalization means that the Kyrgyz state preferred an open economic border—one in which it placed few or no impediments to the movement of goods. The de facto weakness of Kyrgyz coercive institutions would predict that the Kyrgyz central state would forgo protecting its border against potentially threatening flows (contraband, irredentist movement, etc) and instead seek low cost means of guaranteeing the security of its border. Instead of setting up aggressive border patrols and stationing armed units along the boundary, the Kyrgyz should pursue low cost means to guarantee their border.

A look at the empirical record corroborates these predictions. The Kyrgyz were the area’s most outspoken advocates of border delimitation and dispute resolution. After all, delimitation would accomplish two goals for Kyrgyz state-building: First, it would result in the de jure recognition of Kyrgyz territory and thus promote the integrity of

Kyrgyz territory (i.e., outlying regions with the ability to secede or evade central state
controls would have little incentive to break away and would be hard pressed to find an
external state sponsor). Second, and more important, a delimited border would be both
stable and open. Delimitation would allow the Kyrgyz state to create ports of entry for
goods and customs posts along that border. This would guarantee the stable movement
of goods in and out of Kyrgyz territory leading to customs taxes and more importantly
international assistance and credits for promoting an open, trade based economy. Dead
last on the Kyrgyz state’s list of priorities was the stationing of border guards and
military units. The Kyrgyz state neglected to commission new border guards and insisted
that the border first be delimited, even as reports of militants infiltrating the border zone
reached the capital in the late 1990s.

**UZBEKISTAN “THE AUTARCH”**

Uzbekistan emerged as Central Asia’s most populous state and largest economy.
It is the only state to border on all of the region’s other states, and it is centrally located in
the area’s transportation network and energy infrastructure. Delimitation issues
concerning the location of the boundary arose with all of Uzbekistan’s neighbors by the
mid-1990s. There is broad consensus among Central Asian scholars that the Uzbek
state is the most centralized and has the highest overall coercive capacity in the region.

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29 See, for example, John Ishiyama, “Neopatrimonialism and the Prospects for Democratization in the
   Central Asian Republics,” in Sally N. Cummings, ed., *Power and Change in Central Asia* (London:
   Routledge, 2002); Pauline Jones Luong, “After the Break-up: Institutional Design in Transitional States,”
   *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 5 (June 2000), pp. 563-592; Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia’s
   New States: Independence, Foreign Policy, and Regional Security* (Washington D.C., USIP Press, 1995);
   and Rajan Menon and Hendrik Spruyt, “The Limits of Neorealism: Understanding Security in Central
From the moment of independence, the state was highly successful in asserting control over political activity as well as in placing strict controls over the national economy.

**Coercion:** Early on, the Uzbek state implemented policy to monitor economic, social and electoral procedure in the regions.\(^{30}\) Systematic steps were taken to eliminate opposition, strip provincial leaders of powers, and tighten control over the media. The main target of Uzbek state suppression is the political opposition, Islamic or otherwise. President Karimov took aggressive steps early on to arrest those perceived of Islamic political activism. A crackdown in 1992 intensified in 1997 when the government expanded a pilot program of repression from the Namangan area to the rest of the country.\(^{31}\)

**Extraction:** The Uzbek state’s policies of economic extraction and revenue building are also heavy in coercive tactics. Uzbek economic policy prescribes autarchy, a form of welfare authoritarianism that includes strict controls on foreign currency, banking, and trade.\(^{32}\) One particularly instructive example involves Uzbek cotton farmers. State regulations require Uzbek farmers to sell their cotton exclusively to the Uzbek state at rates well below world market prices. The Uzbek state then sells the cotton abroad at a profit and keeps the proceeds. The state then uses this revenue to perpetuate its existence and state-building policies. For instance, it subsidizes the importation of consumer goods, it provides subsidies to domestic industry, and it pays the salary of the bureaucracy and growing ranks of police and military.\(^{33}\)

\(^{33}\) As explained in a report by the Economic Intelligence Unit, *Country Report, Uzbekistan* (March 2001).
Border control predictably should play a central role in promoting these high-coercion, hyper-autarchic policies. The ability to maintain successful coercion over political life will require that borders control both the entry and exit of potential challengers, especially along Uzbekistan’s densely populated western border with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Moreover, the success of economic autarchy requires strict surveillance and control over the flow of goods in and out of Uzbekistan’s borders. Uzbek preferences on border security can be expected to put emphasis foremost on security against extremist flows and secondly on monitoring and restricting free trade at the border. This predicts that Uzbekistan will police its boundaries aggressively. While it is difficult to predict what this will mean for particular preferences on delimitation strategy, it is reasonable to expect that Uzbekistan will be willing to enter negotiations with its neighbors on delimiting its borders if delimitation does not interfere with actual policing.

The evidence confirms these predictions. The Uzbek state was the first in the region to deploy military units along its borders. Indeed, border control has been turned into a centerpiece of Uzbek security policy. Assessing the empirical record on the centrality of enforcing customs policy at the border proves more difficult. Systematic data is unavailable, although news reports suggest that Uzbek customs officials are particularly aggressive in patrolling against smugglers. Still, there is evidence that farmers as well as provincial officials hostile to state rule collaborate to smuggle staples across the border. The broad exchange-rate spreads and commodity price distortion give

34 Uzbekistan’s border legislation effectively links the border guard to the army and places the border at the forefront of state security. The law on border security charges combat units with the defense of the border, prescribes tight centralization of security procedure, and forbids cooperation with the border authorities of neighboring states. On the details, see BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 17 October 1999, “Uzbek Law on Protection of State Border Published,” Na Postu, Tashkent (8 October 1999).
 illicit traders ample opportunity to profit, even after bribing customs agents. However, the fact that the Uzbek autarchic economy managed to survive in these years with large profits suggests that border controls have been moderately successful.

Where delimitation strategies are concerned, the Uzbek state has been extremely uncooperative. It resisted participating in bilateral and multilateral talks with neighboring states. While other Central Asian states moved quickly to delimit their boundaries, today many of Uzbekistan’s borders remain undelimited.

A potential criticism of the state-building hypothesis should be addressed at this point. Critics—from the realist and territorial dispute literatures—might argue that Uzbekistan’s lack of cooperation is a logical outcome given Uzbek military preponderance in the region. The Uzbek state has no incentive to delimit its borders if giving up territory or strategic outposts will be the end result. Yet empirical evidence dispels these arguments. In a border dispute with Kazakhstan in 2002, the Uzbek state moved quickly to reach a settlement. This is a particular challenge for rival hypotheses as the Uzbek state handed over to its weak northern neighbor territory that included villages populated in part by ethnic Uzbeks, a large reservoir, mineral resources, and a hydroelectric dam.

TAJIKISTAN “THE SMUGGLER”

The Tajik civil war, which lasted from 1992-97, complicates a straightforward specification of state-building strategies. The war destroyed the economy, displaced

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35 A survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2001) estimates that unrecorded imports likely total anywhere from 10 to 40% of official import expenditure. Illicit trade is not restricted to cotton. Traders export subsidized Uzbek consumer goods to neighboring countries where they profit from a substantial mark-up.

populations, and delayed crucial reforms. During the civil war, authorities had little interest in solving demarcation disputes or territorial claims made on Tajik land by neighboring states, despite the Uzbek army’s regular incursions into Tajik territory. The end of the war brought international intervention in the form of peacekeeping and financial assistance as well as a larger presence of Russian soldiers under CIS treaty agreement. Moreover, the de facto weakness of the Tajik state, coupled with a multi-ethnic population, winding borders, and a mountainous territory would make it difficult to maintain central rule in the event of external challenge or secessionism.  

Shattered by the war and confronted with ruling a remote territory, the main policy orientation of the post-war Tajik state is to extract revenues to perpetuate the state. Although foreign aid and sales from cotton and minerals make up a large part of government revenues, during the civil war drug smuggling networks presented a lucrative source of revenue to the state and warring faction alike. Warring parties financed their participation by either directly engaging in the smuggling of contraband or by extending protection to existing smuggling networks. Smuggling networks originating in Afghanistan, which traversed Tajikistan to points north in the CIS, hardened during this period and persisted after the end of the civil war.

To see these networks of contraband as a mere lack of capacity would miss a more important point. The Tajik state survives precisely because it collects protection fees from these smuggling networks. Reports of NGOs working in the area detailed substantial increases in the carrying capacity of these networks, and it is estimated that only 3-6% of the opiates originating in Afghanistan are seized by Tajik authorities en

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route to Russia.\textsuperscript{38} Research by some scholars suggests that high level orders have been handed down to local authorities instructing them to extend protection to these networks.\textsuperscript{39} The Tajik border thus contributes to the perpetuation of the Tajik state by remaining open to contraband. Delimitation and the control of other flows—including cross-border militants—take a back seat.

![chart with states’ preferences]

**Interactive Outcomes: Three Case Studies of Conflict and Cooperation**

Previous sections established a causal mechanism between state-building policies and security preferences. Yet, it remains to be seen whether or not such preferences translate into significant outcomes for interstate conflict and cooperation. In this section, I argue that divergent state preferences become entrenched in the form of incompatible strategies of border control and security. These strategies cause bordering states to forego cooperation in policing and securing their borders.

**Hypothesis 2:** Incompatible strategies of border security result in state-to-state disputes even in the presence of a mutual, third-party threat.

The argument here is not that states experience border conflict because they see one another as threatening. Instead, the argument posits that that two varying strategies of securing a border can lead to conflict even in the absence of a conventional, state-to-


\textsuperscript{39} See, for example, Nancy Lubin, “Who’s Watching the Watchdogs?” *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 43-56.
state security dilemma. The causal mechanism underlying this hypothesis is simple: Two states define a third-party as a mutual threat to their interests. If two states rank their priorities in securing their borders in largely similar ways, then cooperation is likely to result. However, if states rank their priorities differently, then cooperation can emerge only if the two states link and coordinate their policies so that both sides attain their preferences. Thus, the key factor preventing cooperation is at the implementation stage. If one state’s attempt to secure its border necessarily prevents the other state of its ability to achieve and implement its most preferred method of security, we are likely to see conflict over border security. In the rest of this paper, I test the effects of such mutually exclusive priorities in border security.

I focus on three paired boundaries in Central Asia: The Uzbek-Kyrgyz border, the Tajik-Kyrgyz boundary, and the Chinese-Kyrgyz border. These three cases allow for controlled variation of the hypothesized causal mechanism. Each of the paired boundaries includes Kyrgyzstan, allowing us to hold constant state-building policy along one side of the border, while varying state-building policy and border preferences along the other side. All of the paired boundaries are affected by cross-border militancy, thereby, holding the third-party threat factor constant. The case selection also subjects the second proposition to an interesting test: The case of the Chinese-Kyrgyz border examines cross-border cooperation in the presence of a sizeable territorial dispute.

**UZBEK-KYRGYZ BOUNDARY**

By the mid-1990s growing numbers of extremists and militants had taken advantage of the collapse of the Tajik state and the civil war to set up camp in Tajikistan’s remote northern provinces. Militants used Tajik territory as a base to kidnap
officials and foreigners, launch attacks as well as bombing campaigns on Uzbek and Kyrgyz territory alike.\textsuperscript{40} Despite the militant activity along their shared border and their common interest in coordinating security strategy, the Uzbek and Kyrgyz states refused to cooperate and pool their resources. This boundary should have been an easy case for cooperation, especially as the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks did not have any territorial claims on one another. Instead of cooperating and pooling their resources to deal with militancy, the boundary became a site of conflict between the two states characterized by violence, escalation, and frequent closure.

The conflict over border policy began in the mid-to-late 1990s as the two states attempted to implement modes of border security in line with their state-building preferences. The Kyrgyz insisted on delimiting the border and keeping it open to the flow of goods. The Uzbek state, instead, quickly moved to prevent the flow of unauthorized crossings by people and goods along the border. This unilateral enforcement resulted in tremendous obstruction of the movement of goods, especially in the Osh area, and by 1998 had triggered the first appreciable dispute on record.\textsuperscript{41}

Throughout 1999 cross-border militant activity and violence spiked in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and it became clear that extremists were operating across the border. The Uzbek state reacted by sending troops and border guards on expeditions into Kyrgyz territory to suppress extremist operatives. Kyrgyz authorities condemned this violation of their sovereignty but instead of reinforcing the border, they called for immediate delimitation proceedings and insisted that the border stay open.

\textsuperscript{41} BBC Monitoring Central Asia, 19 April 1998, “Kyrgyz MPs appeal against Uzbek customs ‘impudence’,” Vecherniy Bishkek, Bishkek (10 April 1998).
The Kyrgyz refused to station border guards until the border was delimited while the Uzbek state insisted that Kyrgyz forces take up positions along the boundary. The Kyrgyz insistence on recognizing and managing the boundary from a legal-diplomatic perspective led to the dismissal of remaining Russian border guard forces on Kyrgyz soil, even as Uzbekistan increased the volume of threats, began to violate Kyrgyz territory, and quit the CIS.  

Incompatible preferences on border security converted the boundary to a site of state-to-state conflict. Rather than coordinate strategy to deal with the militant threat, the management of the boundary itself became the subject of conflict. The Uzbek state began to mine the border and construct barriers, watchtowers, and dead zones along the Kyrgyz border. This strategy of unilaterally securing the border foreclosed cooperation, closed the border to the movement of goods, and denied the Kyrgyz its most desired goal—the delimitation and demarcation of the boundary. Kyrgyz state and border security officials were so determined to pursue demarcation that the head of Kyrgyz border security insisted that a bilateral commission physically walk and demarcate the boundary before it would be delimited. 

Indeed, many of these unilateral fortifications were constructed deep within Kyrgyz territory. The incompatibility of the two state’s preferences in securing the border, thus, not only increased the rate of conflict along the boundary, but also created a

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44 BBC Monitoring International Reports, 26 December 2003, “Kyrgyzstan has few border guards than neighbors,” Vecherniy Bishkek (23 December 2003).
territorial dispute where none existed. Uzbek forces entrenched themselves on Kyrgyz territory and refuse to leave.47

KYRGYZ-CHINESE BOUNDARY

The conflict and high level of insecurity along the Uzbek-Kyrgyz boundary is in stark contrast to the cooperation and security achieved along the Chinese-Kyrgyz boundary. This is surprising for several reasons. First, China and Kyrgyzstan inherited a long-standing territorial dispute following Soviet collapse that could be expected to tip the two states toward conflict. Second, although cross-border militant activity existed along their border, China was disproportionately threatened by Uighur separatists that had set up camp on the Kyrgyz side. Third, the Chinese were capable—like the Uzbeks—of unilaterally and aggressively policing the border.

Yet, the critical factor distinguishing the Kyrgyz-Chinese boundary from the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border appears to have been the compatibility of Kyrgyz-Chinese preferences on border security. Both Kyrgyz and Chinese officials wanted a border that

47 The failure to link preferences and pool security efforts along the boundary has had another interesting effect. Despite the aggressive and expensive militarization of its border, Uzbekistan’s ability to filter out the militant threat remains low. Evidence suggests that the combat units stationed to protect the boundaries were unable to prevent infiltration. Instead, the militants learned to adapt to Uzbek policing tactics. Uzbek border guards have not only failed to detect the infiltration of militants but have also been attacked from behind by militants who first infiltrated the boundary undetected. According to some estimates, the flow of contraband and weapons into Uzbekistan has increased in recent years despite more aggressive policing.
was open to trade. At the same time, the Chinese—much like the Kyrgyz—valued delimitation as a security strategy. By the mid-1990s delimitation along these boundaries had progressed speedily and the two states had proposed and implemented troop reductions and demilitarization. Domestic opposition in the Kyrgyz Republic blasted the territorial settlement with China, which they argued was shrouded in secrecy and treacherously gave up national territory. However, regime elites and officials in the Foreign Ministry explained that the loss of some land was well worth the opportunity to delimit and demilitarize the frontier zone. It would permit trade, allow cooperation in prevention of separatism and terror, and ultimately shore up Kyrgyz sovereignty.

Kyrgyz and Chinese border security forces have since cooperated substantially to create a boundary regime that filters perceived threats but remains open to the movement of goods and people. While escalation, conflict and infiltration are regular features along the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, Chinese-Kyrgyz border guards successfully cooperate to implement joint patrols and exchange information as a means of curtailing border jumping and weapons smuggling.

49 Fravel, “Diversionary Peace”.
50 The Chinese-Kyrgyz territorial agreement was ratified in 2002. While this ratification occurred over 10 years following Kyrgyz independence, this does not rebuke the argument. Chinese and Kyrgyz state officials demilitarized and boundary and negotiated a territorial settlement as early as the mid-90s. However, the nationalist opposition parties in Kyrgyzstan mobilized against the settlement and delayed its ratification. A ratification attempt was delayed to 1999 and again to 2002 when was finally approved by the Kyrgyz legislature.
TAJIK-KYRGYZ BOUNDARY

Events along the Tajik-Kyrgyz boundary present a particular challenge for the theory in this paper. Kyrgyz preferences for a boundary that is both delimited and open to the flow of goods are moderately compatible with Tajik preferences for a boundary that is firstly open to contraband and secondly delimited. In other words, along this boundary we might expect to see the Tajik state arriving at a quick delimitation agreement with Kyrgyzstan in exchange for an open customs policy that allows the unfettered movement of goods—legal and illicit—across the border. Instead, there has been little-to-no progress made on matters of delimitation and the Kyrgyz-Tajik border has been the site of periodic violence and escalation.\(^53\)

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan entered into talks over delimitation of their common boundary later than any other pair of states in the region. Talks on delimiting the boundary seem to have begun only in 2004. The reluctant participation in delimitation talks by Tajik officials seems to have been prompted by the international community and international organizations that are operating in Tajikistan and which aim to foster international and domestic security. The reluctant participation of Tajik officials, despite the absence of a territorial dispute along the Kyrgyz border is an indicator of cross-border smuggling and corruption that is sanctioned by high-level state officials.

Indeed the Tajik state has likely prevented the delimitation of the border in order to avoid the bilateral and international scrutiny that follows delimitation agreements.

Following delimitation, borders become the focus of commissions, reports, and on-site inspections that publicize problems involving the movement of goods, people, and the incidence of trafficking in illegal substances. A delimitation and demarcation agreement with Kyrgyzstan will mean the permanent stationing of newly trained border guards and customs officials along the border. Such a stationing could disrupt the smuggling networks in which existing Tajik border guards seem to be involved. The Tajik state’s aversion to creating a formal boundary regime along the Kyrgyz boundary is such that officials have turned a blind eye to Tajik locals near the border area who periodically attack and destroy customs and border posts that the Kyrgyz state eventually set up on a temporary basis. While Tajik authorities regularly condemn illicit trade and drug trafficking, in reality their interests lie in preventing the delimitation and consequent deployment of officials and border guards to the boundary. Nuralisho Nazarov, Head of the General Staff of the Tajik border troops, made a telling public statement: “Both sides have the right to set up border and customs posts on their territories, but since the territory is still disputed, there should not be posts in any sides”.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper has argued that, in new states, border security strategies are conditioned by state-building dynamics. The state-building approach to border security explains why institutions of border security do not react uniformly to similar types of

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external threats. The approach here overturns implicit assumptions in IR that interstate borders are necessarily rational responses to the international system.

The findings of this paper also make a valuable contribution to the literature on state-failure. A growing number of scholars within this literature suggest that the time has come to rethink the borders of multi-ethnic and failing states and they argue that conflict can be reduced via partitioning and right-sizing states. This paper suggests a different conclusion. A cause of state-failure may lie—not in demographic characteristics or sub-optimal state size—but rather in border security strategies and the relative efficiency that states attain in filtering out contraband and cross-border extremism.

A logical next step would thus be to test the theory in other state systems. The Central Asian testing ground is, admittedly, a limited test of the argument as Central Asia represents a potentially unique system given its geographic location and Soviet institutional legacy. Nonetheless, the controlled case studies in this paper have generated multiple observable mechanisms, many of which are likely to obtain in other international settings.

In addition to theory-building, this paper also offers useful policy insight. In recent years, the US has substantially increased its military aid to developing states to improve border security and prevent cross-border terrorism, drug and weapons

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smuggling. Such assistance enables states to adopt aggressive and unilateral strategies of border control. The state-to-state conflict such strategies provoke is rarely worth the output (in terms of captured and deterred CTA’s). Instead, the US, the EU, and Russia should invest their energies and political capital in brokering issue linkage in cross-border border politics and make military aid contingent on the adoption of bilateral security strategies.