

# **Blocs, States, and Borderlands: Explaining Russia’s Selective Territorial Revisionism**

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“Today just an orderly,  
Tomorrow I erase kingdoms on the map.”  
Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Lenin*

## **Abstract**

Variation in post-Soviet Russia’s borderland policies challenges empirical findings in International Relations that associate militarized territorial revisionism with economic and demographic incentives and the absence of border settlements. This study offers additional insights from game theory. First, iterated Prisoners’ Dilemma tournaments imply that state territorial value is interactive – i.e., dependent on interaction frequency across groups of states. Second, the collective action logic shows how a revisionist state may discount international constraints by engaging in “corporate raiding” of a status quo powers coalition. Finally, the minimal winning coalitions theory explains why military power may be restricted to producing controlled borderlessness to influence neighbors without territory holding costs. A model integrating these insights and a case study of Russia’s border policies with Georgia and Azerbaijan suggests that the interactive dynamic between the EU and the Eurasian Union could be decisive in shaping and reshaping Eurasia’s interstate borders over the coming decade.

## **Introduction**

Why do revisionist powers militarily challenge some international borders but not others, often regardless of the economic, geopolitical and symbolic value of the claimed territories or the extent of the territorial settlement? This study examines this general question – and its implications for theorizing territorial conflict in the discipline of International Relations (IR) – in the light of post-Soviet Russia’s borderland policies. These policies have varied widely – from diplomatic defense of the territorial status quo vis-à-vis Japan and limited concessions to China, to technocratic regulation and benign neglect concerning its Mongolian and Kazakhstan borderlands to militarized territorial revisionism in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Whereas territorial status quo defense in the Far East and the non-advancement of territorial claims against the NATO-bound Baltic States – if treated as single cases – can be viewed as classic *Realpolitik*, bringing in a broader range of post-Soviet Russia’s borderland policies raises theoretically significant puzzles.

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On the one hand, supporting the claims of political realism, empirical studies have established that shared interstate borders *in their own right* facilitate armed conflict – chiefly because they increase the probability of disputes through interaction,<sup>1</sup> opportunity for military power projection,<sup>2</sup> and contagion.<sup>3</sup> Territory has also been theorized as a source of military conflict and war in general due to its intrinsic value (natural resources, population size, or other opportunities from possession) and relational importance (geographic location, ethnic composition of the population, historical significance).<sup>4</sup> More recent research – based on statistical analysis of the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID) data of the Correlates of War project – refined these findings showing that border geography accounts for a significant amount of the clustering and spread of violent conflict.<sup>5</sup> An extensive analysis of the MID data covering conflicts from 1816 through 1992 found that recurring territorial disputes entice states to enter into competing alliances, to build up their military power and to ritualize war-threatening behavior.<sup>6</sup> It has also been shown that territorial incentives enhance interstate military conflict proclivity when states disintegrate or gain independence.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, significant empirical evidence upholds neoliberalist claims that states should see net benefits in adhering to shared normative rules in world politics – among which sovereignty and territorial integrity are some of the strongest.<sup>8</sup> Large-N studies using the MID data have shown that territorial rules and norms matter.<sup>9</sup> In particular, territorial delineation agreements – in their own right – have been associated with the diminution of violent territorial conflict. War and militarized disputes from 1816 to 2001 tended to decline significantly among states that settled their shared boundaries, regardless of government type.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Richardson, *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels* (Pittsburgh: Boxwood Press, 1960); James Wesley, “Frequency of Wars and Geographical Opportunity,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 6 (1962): 387–389.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Boulding, *Conflict and Defense* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Most, Randolph Siverson, and Harvey Starr, “The Logic and Study of the Diffusion of International War,” in *Handbook of War Studies*, ed. Manus Midlarsky (Winchester, Mass.: Unwin-Hyman, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Gary Goertz and Paul Diehl, *Territorial Changes and International Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1992): 17–21.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Braithwaite, “The Geographic Spread of Militarized Disputes,” *Journal of Peace Research* 43:5 (2006): 507–522; Michael Ward and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Location, Location, Location: An MCMC Approach to Modeling the Spatial Context of War and Peace,” *Political Analysis* 10:2 (2002): 244–260; Halvard Buhaug and Scott Gates, “The Geography of Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research* 39:4 (2002): 417–433.

<sup>6</sup> Paul D. Senese and John A. Vasquez, “Assessing the Steps to War,” *British Journal of Political Science* 35 (2005): 607–633.

<sup>7</sup> Goertz and Diehl, *Territorial Changes*.

<sup>8</sup> David Armstrong and Jutta Brunée, *Routledge Handbook of International Law* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009); William R. Slomanson, *Fundamental Perspectives on International Law* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Stephen A. Kocs, “Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945–1987,” *Journal of Politics* 57:1 (1995): 159–175; Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, “Contested Territory, Strategic Rivalries, and Conflict Escalation,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50:1 (2006): 145–167; Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, “Borders, Rivalry, Democracy, and Conflict in the European Region, 1816–1994,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28:3 (2011): 208–305.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew P. Owsiak, “Signing Up for Peace: International Boundary Agreements, Democracy, and Militarized Interstate Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56:1 (2012): 51–66. Furthermore, other studies suggest that

Additionally, territorial expansionism, like sovereignty and identity, can be discursively constructed.<sup>11</sup> Interpretative studies of public discourses have extensively documented that territory has symbolic value – e.g., as when it is associated with claims to an ancestral homeland, with the core cultural values of the dominant ethnic populations, or with nation-glorifying narratives. The historical meaning of Sevastopol – as a symbol of Russian heroism and sacrifice in the 19th century’s Crimean War and the 1941–1945 Great Patriotic War – would explain why Moscow advanced territorially into Crimea in response to the arrival in power of a pro-Western government in Kyiv in February 2014. This would be consistent with the analysis of the role of symbolic values in Russian foreign policy; of Putin’s successful monopolization of mainstream nationalist and patriotic discourses soon after his arrival in power; and of the widening gap between the normative conceptualizations of Europeanness within the EU and Russia since the Soviet collapse.<sup>12</sup>

Russia’s selective territorial revisionism challenges these theoretical perspectives. For realists, it raises the problem of identifying prospectively, rather than in hindsight, which of the contiguous border territories, with which kind of intrinsic or relational values, may become the target of what kind of territorial revisionism. For one, Russia has not used military intervention in Belarus to undermine the latter’s government in the way Moscow has done in East and South Ukraine – despite recurring conflicts over the last decade and the vilification of Belarus’s president in the mainstream Russian media. Nor did Russia annex neighboring Georgia’s regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after using military power to prop up secessionist local governments. Nor did it intervene militarily in Ukraine in the early 1990s or after the 2004 Orange Revolution. In addition, realist theorizing on the extent to which military power may be used in borderland conflicts is problematic. If the decision to wage war is a function of opportunity and willingness to act, borderland properties may be the source of both. The decision to revise borders by force then becomes reducible to geographic conditions.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the conflation of opportunity and willingness underlies theories of territorial conflict based on “environmental possibilism,” decision-making “menus,” and viability.<sup>14</sup>

For neoliberalism, the challenge is to identify why, when, how, and which territorial

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border settlements improve prospects for democracy within contending states, see: Douglas M. Gibler, “Bordering on Peace: Democracy, Territorial Issues, and Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 51:3 (2007): 509–532.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46 (1992): 391–425.

<sup>12</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, “The Sources of Russia’s Ukraine Policy,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, 158, December 18 (2014): 2–4; Marlene Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2009); Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus: The Other Europes* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Harvey Starr, “Opportunity and Willingness as Ordering Concepts in the Study of War,” *International Interactions* 4 (1978): 363–387; Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic, and International Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> See, respectively, Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Bruce Russett, “A Macroscopic View of International Politics” in *The Analysis of International Politics*, eds. James Rosenau, Vincent Davis, and Maurice East (New York: Free Press, 1972): 109–124; Boulding, *Conflict and Defense*.

settlements are more likely to be forcefully revised by an expansionist rising power. For example, Russia formally pledged, in the 1994 Budapest memorandums (UN Document A/49/765), to respect the territorial integrity and political independence and to abstain from the use of force, the threat of force and economic coercion in any interstate dispute with three of its neighboring states – Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan – in acknowledgement of the latter states agreeing to give up the nuclear weapons inherited from the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Yet only with respect to Ukraine have these memorandums been violated. So were about a dozen major Russia-Ukraine territorial treaties, including a 2004 border delineation treaty (with an addendum of maps to 1:50,000 scale showing the borderline's location), a 2010 border demarcation treaty, and a 2012 agreement on the maritime borders around Crimea.<sup>16</sup> A barrage of protest statements, admonitions, exclusion from the G-8, and economic sanctions against Moscow on the part of major Western powers have failed to reverse Russia's territorial revisionism in Crimea and East Ukraine,<sup>17</sup> as neoliberal theory would predict. Nor has the absence of border delineation or demarcation treaties<sup>18</sup> been a better predictor of militarized territorial revisionism. Whereas by 2008 post-Soviet Russia had no such treaties with both Georgia and Azerbaijan, only in Georgia did Moscow undertake military interventions on behalf of separatist claims of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>19</sup> And this is also despite Russia remaining in dispute with Azerbaijan since 1991 over the legal status of the Caspian Sea – something that could have an impact on access to significant oil and gas deposits (and thus raises the putative intrinsic value of claimable

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<sup>15</sup> Budapest Memorandums on Security Assurances, 1994, UN A/49/765, published December 5, 1994, in *Council on Foreign Relations, Primary Sources*. Accessed November 11, 2014: <http://www.cfr.org/arms-control-disarmament-and-nonproliferation/budapest-memorandums-security-assurances-1994/p32484>

<sup>16</sup> “Ukraina. Informatsiya o mezhdunarodnykh soglasheniyakh [Ukraine. Information about International Agreements],” *Rosgranitsa, Federal Agency for Settlement of the State Borders of the Russian Federation, official website*. Accessed November 10, 2014: <http://www.rosgranitsa.ru/ru/activity/international/countries/ukraine/legalbase>

<sup>17</sup> Official Russian denials of military involvement in East Ukraine are duly noted. However, as a scholarly study, this analysis here and thereafter stays outside politicized international debates and relies on solid evidence presented in the mainstream global media (e.g., Reuters, Associated Press, BBC, *The New York Times*, and *The Economist*) that is, in the case of Russia's use of military force in Ukraine, is beyond reasonable doubt. This includes Putin's own public acknowledgement that Russian military operatives played a decisive role in “professionally” taking over Crimea. To those who abide by the official Russian denial, however, this analysis is still academically valuable on the “as if” basis – assuming some other expansionist power could act the same way in a different setting (e.g., China vis-à-vis Russia or Japan).

<sup>18</sup> Delineation refers to agreements on where the border passes. Demarcation is a more technical next step outlining exactly how the borderline is to be marked (e.g., the number and the distance between border posts, the height of guard towers, etc.). The latter cannot be done without the former.

<sup>19</sup> One alternative explanation may be derived from the official Kremlin argument that Russia's military intervention in August 2008 was in response to bombardments of the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali that came from the Georgian troops' positions – a factor that was not observed in Azerbaijan. Yet, this explanation does not account for crucial developments in May–July 2008, well before the Tskhinvali fighting, without which Russia's rapid and decisive deployment of force against Georgia would have been impossible – particularly full-scale exercises of the 58<sup>th</sup> Army in the North Caucasus and the deployment of Russian engineer corps to make operational the railroad running the length of Abkhazia and to lay down the tracks for the Russian military deployment in August.

territories).<sup>20</sup>

For constructivists, as White and Feklyunina acknowledged, the major conceptual problem is establishing the link between discursively formulated elite preferences and specific foreign policy choices. For example, despite the widening gap between normative definitions of Europe within the EU and in Russia, these authors have documented that the leading preference in Russia's public discourses in the run-up to the conflict with Ukraine was for a "multi-vector foreign policy" rather than for territorial revisionism.<sup>21</sup> One underlying problem is that chiefs of state may conceal their true preferences and promote elite and public discourses that distract or mislead domestic and foreign audiences. The Kremlin's actions in Ukraine have been by and large consistent with what Tsygankov, in a 2008 study, identified as the foreign policy preferences of Russia's hard-line nationalists – including the restoration of Russia's imperial domain and support for separatism in Ukraine. The same study, however, argued that Putin consistently rejected this hard-line position – hence, the increasing political prominence of hard-line discourses could not be interpreted as a signal of Russia's territorial revisionism.<sup>22</sup> Another problem is the operationalization of the discursive framing of symbolic value, as Laruelle's analysis of Russian nationalist movements and ideologies indicates. As she concluded, "...it continues to be difficult, if indeed, impossible to classify these movements systematically by placing them with respect to global criteria such as a right-left spectrum or an ethno-nationalism-imperialist binomial."<sup>23</sup> Yet, without conceptual tools to identify specific discourse types *ex ante*, prospective estimates of symbolic value framing are set to remain indeterminate.

In sum, existing studies in IR have extensively examined the impact of borderland disputes and settlement on militarized conflict onset or severity. Yet, considerably less attention has been paid to the why, when, where and how of selective territorial revisionism as well as the selective violation of international laws, rules, and norms. Three questions call for attention. First, what kind of territorial value motivates revisionism? Second, why would such motivation outweigh external risks and constraints, including international opprobrium, sanctions, mobilization costs, and blowback (i.e., if induced instability in a neighboring state spills over into the instability-initiating state)? Third, to what extent is military power likely to be used? To address these questions this paper draws on game theory. Three key theoretical insights are developed to address each of these principal puzzles in the order listed above – evolutionary group behavior, collective action problems, and minimal winning coalitions.

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<sup>20</sup> "Gruziia. Informatsiia o mezhdunarodnykh soglasheniiakh [Georgia. Information about International Agreements]," *Rosgranitsa, Federal Agency for Settlement of the State Borders of the Russian Federation, official website*. Accessed November 11, 2014: <http://www.rosgranitsa.ru/ru/activity/international/countries/georgia/legalbase>; "Azerbaijan," *Rosgranitsa, Federal Agency for Settlement of the State Borders of the Russian Federation, official website*. Accessed November 11, 2014: <http://www.rosgranitsa.ru/ru/activity/international/countries/azerbaijan>

<sup>21</sup> White and Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies*, Chapter 8.

<sup>22</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, "From Belgrade to Kiev: Hard-line Nationalism and Russia's Foreign Policy," in *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (London: Routledge, 2008), 187–202.

<sup>23</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "Rethinking Russian Nationalism: Historical Continuity, Political Diversity, and Doctrinal Fragmentation," in *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (London: Routledge, 2008): 13–48.

## Interactive Territorial Value

The evolutionary approach extended the conceptual reach of game theory by modeling interactions among *groups* or *populations*, not just individuals.<sup>24</sup> One critical resulting concept was evolutionary stable strategies (ESS) – such as the strategy known as TIT-FOR-TAT (TFT) in Axelrod’s Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma (IPD) game tournaments.<sup>25</sup> If one population or group plays ESS among themselves over multiple moves with no reasonable time limit (i.e., infinitely), it means members of no other group can "invade" them or outplay them with a better strategy. In other words, this precludes any outsider group from successfully playing a strategy that would give strong enough incentives to any member of the ESS-playing in-group to abandon their collective strategy.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, if players interact more frequently within a group than outside a group, the temptation to defect against outsiders increases – and so does the temptation to defend oneself from the other side’s unilateral defection.

Sophisticated computer simulations have confirmed and enhanced this insight. A 2011 study of evolutionary IPD competitions found that TFT was outperformed by a hybrid between TFT and a strategy called “Clique” as well as by several other strategies, all of which were also hybrids with Clique. The latter cooperates only with in-group members and is hostile to non-group members. The hybrid strategy plays TFT or other cooperation-favoring strategies if its frequency in the population is less than 50 percent, but otherwise it switched to Clique. A combination of in-group favoritism and explore-and-exploit-cooperation-benefits emerged as a dominant ESS strategy outperforming group-indiscriminate TFT.<sup>27</sup>

The major insight from ESS is that territorial revisionism needs to be viewed not only and perhaps not so much in dyadic terms (i.e., as a product of bilateral interactions of bordering states or their alliances, or of clashing economic and security interests or ethnic separatism and irredentism), but as part of multilateral *group* interactions inside and outside states – which, in practice, means interactions across economic and political unions, associations or other institutions which, for shorthand, will be referred to in this article as *blocs*. This would pertain especially to large states with long land borders and multiple neighboring states with membership in multiple international organizations and/or transnational regimes. It would also be especially pertinent in contexts such as the Soviet collapse, when the new states that emerged had options regarding which transnational

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<sup>24</sup> John Maynard Smith, *Evolution and the Theory of Games* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Robert Axelrod, *Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); for a useful overview, see Herbert Gintis, *Game Theory Evolving: A Problem-centered Introduction to Modeling Strategic Interaction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chaps. 7–9.

<sup>25</sup> Axelrod, *Evolution of Cooperation*.

<sup>26</sup> Gintis, *Game Theory Evolving*, 148. This means that while all ESS are also Nash equilibrium strategies, not all Nash equilibrium strategies are ESS.

<sup>27</sup> Jiawei Li, Philip Hingston, and Graham Kendall, “Engineering Design of Strategies for Winning Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma Competitions,” *IEEE Transactions on Computational Intelligence and AI In Games* 3:4, December (2011): 348–360. IEEE is the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, an international professional association with the stated purpose of advancing technological innovation and excellence.

institutions to join. In Russia, uncertainty over the geopolitical orientation of the former Soviet republics and Russia's own provinces, particularly in the Northern Caucasus and the Far East, emerged immediately after the Soviet collapse and became a central concern in the programmatic foreign policy discourses of all major parliamentary parties and in the Yeltsin administration's security establishment. These concerns were a significant factor in Russia's use of military power in Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Chechnya.<sup>28</sup> Extrapolating to border policies, states in a free-trade area or bloc would do best by maintaining borders as open as possible to bloc members and as restrictive as possible to bloc non-members.

Thus, nontrivially, liberalization of border regimes among one group of states may induce other states to coerce their neighbors into blocs of their own. This suggests that Moscow's drive to incorporate post-Soviet states into a Russia-controlled closer-integrated subsystem (Eurasian Union) is a particularly strong, if not a predominant motivation for Russia's militarized border revisionism in EU/NATO-aspirant Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. The same logic would also explain why Russia would be less likely to undertake territorial revisionism vis-à-vis the neighboring non-EU/NATO-aspirant states of Belarus, Kazakhstan or Mongolia. In the latter, dyadic status quo would be Russia's logical preference, because the inclusion in or exclusion from an outside border-liberalizing subsystem is not a salient issue.

One important conceptual implication is that in international relations territories have not only intrinsic (resources), relational (population compositions) or symbolic value, but also *interactive* value – that is the state's value of interaction frequency with any state. Interactive territorial value is conceptually akin to capital turnover in economics – the more frequently a good is traded the more income it generates at constant price. Interactive value is therefore separate and distinct from other types of territorial value while also serving as their catalyst or multiplier. It could be viewed as a conduit to benefits or as a barrier to costs that may result from interaction with other territories *through* the territory in question. One can measure interactive territorial value therefore as an opportunity or transaction cost for entities located within it and also outside it.<sup>29</sup> Interactive value is also asymmetric – what benefits State A may be costly to State B. The assessment of interactivity value and costs is therefore likely to be a discrete and integral part in the calculus of territorial and border policies. Also, states would seek to maximize the positive effects of interactivity and take into account short- and long-term valuations, weighing economic, political, security and other impacts. Interactive value does not mean all states will always seek more open exchanges with their neighbors. A state seeking greater political influence in a neighboring state may restrict economic interactivity with that state in the short term with a view to changing the target state's geopolitical orientation or to

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<sup>28</sup> Mikhail Alexseev, "Russia's 'Cold Peace' Consensus: Transcending the Presidential Election," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 21:1, Spring–Summer (1997): 33–49.

<sup>29</sup> For example, State A could see territorial control over neighboring State B as a way to reduce interaction costs with State C, with which it doesn't share a border. State A may also measure the interactive value of State B in terms of transaction costs that State B may impose on the flow of people, capital, and goods between it and State A, relative to State C.

undermining its government and inducing the arrival in power of a more compliant leadership.<sup>30</sup> The interactive value is not a model, but a factor to be considered when established decision models are applied.<sup>31</sup> The illustrations below demonstrate the importance of such consideration.

For an example relevant to Russia, one may consider the end of the Cold War as a tectonic shift in interactive territorial values across Eurasia. During the Cold War, Russia had high interaction frequency with all former Soviet Union republics, which, in turn, had low interaction frequency with states outside the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, when the former republics became independent states, their interaction frequency with Russia declined significantly relative to their interaction frequency with other states. At the same time, the European Union emerged as an institution whose primary goal was to reduce interstate interaction barriers within its boundaries. Therefore, a post-Soviet state with any foreseeable prospects of EU accession, no matter how remote, would have a powerful incentive to compensate for a decline of its interaction frequency with other former Soviet republics by interacting more with the EU. This would also raise the incentive of some former republics outside Russia to adhere to the European Union's institutional and behavioral standards.

The latter means interactive territorial value is not reducible to economics. It is also, to a significant extent, about sovereignty and political power. Michael Doyle's historical-comparative synthesis of realist and liberalist perspectives in international relations<sup>32</sup> suggests that conflict over territorial interactivity would be particularly likely at the juncture of consolidated democratic and authoritarian states with hybrid states as geopolitical borderlands. Thus, Russia could join the EU and share in the benefits of interactivity with other EU-bound former Soviet republics. But such a prospect has consistently declined since Putin's arrival in power. Whereas EU membership requires adherence to democratic institutions and values, Russia under Putin became a consolidated authoritarian state.<sup>33</sup> However, staying out of the EU for Russia while other former Soviet republics got closer to the EU could be viewed as a sign of a further relative decline in their interaction frequency with Russia—putatively eroding Moscow's economic and political leverage. Moreover, successful democratization buttressed by economic growth in the neighboring hybrid states may encourage the Russian public to demand democratic reforms in Russia itself, thus threatening Putin's hold on power. In this way, the strategic decision not to seek internal democratization and EU membership translates into a significant appreciation on Moscow's part of the interactive territorial

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<sup>30</sup> Note that interactive value could be negative – e.g. when a neighboring state is perceived as a source of threats such as mass migration, terrorism, undermining of autocratic rule, epidemic, environmental degradation, etc.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Graham Allison, and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision Making: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis. 2nd ed.* (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational, 1999); John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984). This also means that state leaders may miscalculate when assessing interactive territorial value – the same way as they may do in general and for the same reasons. The pursuit of interactive territorial value could well prove costlier than initially anticipated, as could be the case of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* December (1986): 1151–1170.

<sup>33</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2015*. Accessed August 20, 2015: [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH\\_NIT2015\\_06.06.15\\_FINAL.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_NIT2015_06.06.15_FINAL.pdf)



value of the former Soviet republics. This appreciation is directly contingent on the Kremlin's assessment of these states joining the EU. This explains why Russia has engaged in more militarized territorial revisionism vis-à-vis Georgia and Ukraine – which exhibited the strongest proclivity among the newly independent post-Soviet states within the last decade to seek EU membership. The same logic would apply with respect to NATO membership. It also suggests that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania lucked out by moving decisively toward the EU and NATO and making their membership a *fait accompli* before Putin's arrival in power foreclosed Russia's own prospects of closer institutional interdependence with these groups of states. In short, the prospective irretrievable loss of beneficial interaction with neighboring states is likely to motivate territorial revisionism.

More than that, as a predictor of revisionism, the interactive territorial value is likely to supersede intrinsic and relational territorial values. If a state (e.g., Russia's) leadership feels its ability to interact with any given neighboring state is not threatened, it may reasonably expect through this interaction to continue exerting the desired degree of influence over that state and, hence, to benefit from the intrinsic and relational values of the latter's territory. The projected loss of interactivity, however, would mean a diminution of the prospective capacity to exploit these types of territorial value. The most secure response would then be to institute a high-frequency cross-border interaction bloc, within which one's state is dominant, and to persuade or compel the neighboring states to join it instead of joining other blocs.

The logic of events leading up to Russia's militarized takeover of Crimea and invasion of East Ukraine is cogently illustrative of this argument. Moscow's successful economic and political pressure on the government of Viktor Yanukovich not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and, later, its support for cracking down on mass popular pro-EU protests are factors without which the remaining chain of events leading to militarized territorial conflict would not have occurred. In fact, Ukraine's putative membership in the EU versus the Eurasian Union is at the heart of the ongoing military conflict. One may interpose here that the territories where Russia invaded militarily are both of high intrinsic and relational value. These aspects of territorial value explain the overall intent, but not the timing of Russian action. It is important to note that Russia could have annexed Crimea and militarily invaded Donbas on numerous occasions previously – either out of frustration with the loss of the Soviet dominion in the early 1990s or fearing that Ukrainian nationalists would lend massive support to the separatist insurgency in Chechnya in the late 1990s or out of fear that the Orange Revolution of 2004 would spill over to Russia and lead to mass anti-Putin protests. One may think of the evolutionary group logic – Ukraine's increasing proximity to the EU versus Moscow's increasing emphasis on building up the Eurasian Union – as the principle distinguisher between those non-interventions and the 2014 intervention.

A clear illustration comes in Putin's statements in the fall of 2013. In terms of evolutionary game theory, the essence of his argument is that through the removal of trade barriers and increasing compliance with EU economic regulations Ukraine would increasingly play cooperative ESS strategies with the EU states. Following a meeting of the Higher Eurasian Economic Council in Minsk, in late October 2013, Putin argued that through joining the EU free-trade area, Ukraine would have to abolish 7,666 out of approximately 10,000 import and customs tariffs by February 2014. By

2017, Putin projected Ukraine opening up more than 85 percent of its economy to free trade with Europe. “Such a market opening is very dangerous and unacceptable to us at the present stage of the development of Russia’s economy,” said Putin. He also warned that Ukraine would be obligated to comply with technical EU requirements so that Ukrainian producers could export to the EU.<sup>34</sup>

These developments, in Putin’s publicly stated view, also could have translated into an incentive for Ukraine to selectively free ride (cheat) on Russia by dumping products unwanted in the EU (and thus depressing the Russian market and economic development). Putin argued that part of the problem would be a lack of capital in Ukraine to comply with the EU technical standards. Another form of free riding, he said, would be the increasing use of the so-called screwdriver assembly – i.e., when industrial goods made for the most part elsewhere would be finished in Ukraine. This would divert Ukraine’s industrial facilities from working jointly with Russian companies. Putin protested that this trend would impede the development of Russia’s aircraft, space, shipbuilding, and machine-building industries that relied on cooperation with Ukraine. Reflecting these fears, Putin said: “We don’t want to get some kind of present in the form of a screwdriver through the back door.”<sup>35</sup>

This does not mean that the EU enlargement or its Eastern neighborhood policy is the primary source of Russia’s expansionist motivation. In fact, claims that Ukraine’s association with the EU cast its choice over Europe versus Russia in zero-sum terms have been shown to be false. As one serious analyst of these interactions, Nicu Popescu, showed, the EU association did not require Ukraine to change its trading policies with the former Soviet states or opt out of the CIS Free Trade Area Agreement, nor did the CIS rules prohibit Ukraine from participating in other economic unions or border trade arrangements with other states as long as they complied with WTO rules. Moreover, Popescu also showed that even if Ukraine unilaterally changed trade policies in ways that Putin roughly outlined, it would still be unlikely that this would harm more than benefit Russian companies doing business with or through Ukraine. On the other hand, a more economically credible source of zero-sum perspective on these interactions, as Popescu demonstrated, was Russia’s plan for a customs union with the former Soviet republics, in which decisions on third-party tariffs were to be taken at the union level (where Russia would be dominant by default due to its military and economic preponderance).<sup>36</sup>

Whereas interactive territorial value offers the motivation for territorial revisionism, it does not explain why this motivation would override external constraints. The next section investigates this issue through the logic of collective action.

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<sup>34</sup> “Putin okonchatel’no otkazal Ukraine v vozmozhnosti prisoedineniia k tamozhennomu soiuzu [Putin Issued a Final Refusal to Allow Ukraine to Join the Customs Union],” *News.ru*, October 25, 2013. Accessed November 13, 2014: [http://www.newsru.com/world/25oct2013/putin\\_ukr.html](http://www.newsru.com/world/25oct2013/putin_ukr.html)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Nicu Popescu, “The Eurasian Union: The Real, the Imaginary, and the Likely,” *The EU Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper* 132, September (2014): 37–38.

## Corporate Raiding on International Constraints

Agency does not have to be contingent on structure. Determined expansionist leaders don't need to change their long-term goals just because power distributions are unfavorable, or the international law and norms are against them, or economic sanctions are threatened. Instead, they may decide to exploit collective action problems facing international actors who may want to enforce international legal guarantees of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Like Genghis Khan in planning the Mongol imperial expansion across Eurasia, the revisionists may well estimate their capabilities by looking ahead rather than behind them-i.e., by viewing prospective territorial gains as a net power multiplier relative to other international actors. They are also likely to surprise status quo powers by counting on a lack of coordination among them to defend their territories or the territories of their allies, or to impose punishing sanctions on the revisionist power.<sup>37</sup> In other words, they could exploit the collective action problem.<sup>38</sup> The massive literature on this problem in international relations has predominantly explored it as a source of hegemonic decline, difficulties in maintaining alliances or coalitions, environmental degradation (the "tragedy of the commons") or overcoming mobilization barriers in group behavior such as separatist mobilization in civil wars – with a central focus on reducing exploitative, free-riding behavior and solving coordination problems through institutions, norms, identity, binding agreements or other incentives.<sup>39</sup>

Less attention has been paid to how a revisionist power may systematically and deliberately exploit the collective action problem among status quo powers. Game theoretic models in economics and legal studies offer valuable insights. Territorial revisionism looks a lot like corporate raiding. The expansionist power in this model would be the functional equivalent of a corporate raider. The raider is a company that acquires a large enough percentage of shares in a target company to force the shareholders either to sell their stakes at a below pre-raiding value or to buy them back at the above pre-raiding value. The status quo power coalitions would be the functional equivalent of shareholders of the company that the raider targets – also known as target shareholders. The functional equivalent of the expansionist power exploiting interest divergence within the status quo coalition is the

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<sup>37</sup> Mikhail A. Alexseev, *Without Warning: Strategic Intelligence, Threat Assessment, and Global Struggle* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> Russell Hardin, "Collective Action as an Agreeable n-Prisoner's Dilemma," *Behavioral Science* 16, September (1971): 472–481.

<sup>39</sup> Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162:3859 (1968): 1243–1248; Charles P. Kindleberger, "Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation, Public Goods, and Free Riders," *International Studies Quarterly* 25:2, June (1981): 242–254; Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984); Matthias Basedau, Birte Pfeiffer, and Johannes Vüllers, "Bad Religion? Religion, Collective action, and the Onset of Armed Conflict in Developing Countries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* July (2014): 1–30; Joshua Gubler and Joel S. Selway, "Horizontal Inequality, Crosscutting Cleavages, and Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56:2 (2012): 206–232; Henry E. Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 62–80; on the role of binding agreements and organizational discipline in reducing the collective action problem, see Steven J. Brams, *Game Theory and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).

successful raider who leverages resources that are smaller than the collective resources of the shareholders to make them agree to the takeover. The status quo power abstention from lending military support to the invaded states would be the functional equivalent of target shareholders tendering their shares to the raider.

The key assumptions of the strict raiding hypothesis are that the target shareholders are atomistic (they act independently, based on their self-interest) and unable to collude. In reality, this assumption would seldom hold, yet it is reasonable that the expansionist (“raiding”) state would consider that in a crisis situation, if individual status quo coalition members have to risk tangible economic losses or military action, their national self-interest would take precedence over collective action. To the extent that this assumption holds, the target shareholders would face the Prisoner’s Dilemma.

Suppose an investor has 2 shares in a targeted company each worth  $x$  dollars and the raider credibly offers to buy one of those shares at  $x$ . But if the buyer gets the controlling stake in the target company, the buyer then is likely to “raid” all of the target assets and buy out the investors at half price. It is in the best interest of all existing investors for the raider’s offer to be unsuccessful – and their refusal to trade shares would support that outcome. However, each investor has a stronger individual incentive to sell to the raider. If the raider’s offer is unsuccessful the investor’s wealth will be unaffected whether s/he sold the shares or not, with a payoff of  $2x$ . However, if the raider’s offer is successful, then it would be in the investor’s advantage to sell shares – if s/he did, the payoff would be  $1.5x$  and if not, then the investor gets stuck with the “sucker’s payoff” of  $x$ . If the majority of target shareholders behave in self-interest, the bidding raider can then exploit this dilemma to seize control of the target resources at less than their market value (i.e., an expansionist power could count on getting away with territorial takeovers without seriously bruising their interests).<sup>40</sup> The key elements of this logic are the raider’s sufficient resources to threaten takeover and the tender offer price being higher than the expected post-execution market price of unpurchased shares. Transposed to our issue area, this means that a revisionist power must have credible military capabilities and economic resources to hold on to occupied territories and to offer binding inducements (such as energy supply contracts) to individual status quo coalition members on terms that would certainly stand to worsen if that member supports retaliatory sanctions on the revisionist state.

In fact, this corporate raiding logic underlies the conception of “nonlinear war” developed by Putin’s long-time political advisor, Vladislav Surkov – who also coined the concept of “sovereign democracy” as a cover for centralization of political authority under Putin in the 2000s.<sup>41</sup> Surkov, writing under a pseudonym, Nathan Dubovitsky, specifically applied “nonlinear war” to Russia’s territorial revisionism in Ukraine. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, a journalist, Peter Pomerantsev, linked this concept with the idea of corporate raiding:

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<sup>40</sup> For extended formal proof of the raiding hypothesis, see E. Han Kim, “The American Experience with Corporate Takeovers and Securities Regulation in Korea,” *Korean Economic Review* 12 (1985): 231–232.

<sup>41</sup> “Ukraine and Russia: War by Any Other Name,” *The Economist* July 5, 2014. Accessed November 14, 2014: <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21606290-russia-has-effect-already-invaded-eastern-ukraine-question-how-west-will>

It is better to understand the Kremlin's view of globalization as a kind of "corporate raiding" – namely, the ultra-violent, post-Soviet version of corporate takeovers. "Raiding" involves buying a minority share in a company, and then using any means at your disposal (false arrests, mafia threats, kidnapping, disinformation, blackmail) to acquire control. Russian elites sometimes refer to the country as a "minority shareholder in globalization," which, given Russia's experience with capitalism, implies it is the world's great "corporate raider." Non-linear war is the means through which a geo-political raider can leverage his relative weakness. And this vision appeals to a very broad constituency across the world, to those full of resentment for the West and infused by the sense that the "global village" model is a priori rigged. For all the talk of Russia's isolation, the BRIC economies have actually been subdued in their criticism of the annexation of Crimea, with the Kremlin thanking both China and India for being understanding.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, in the post-Cold War environment, the status quo powers face a stronger coordination problem when faced with "nonlinear" territorial revisionism. In Pomerantsev's words,

It is naïve to assume the West will win with this new battle with the same formula it used in the Cold War. Back then, the West united free market economics, popular culture, and democratic politics into one package: Parliaments, investment banks, and pop music fused to defeat the politburo, planned economics, and social realism. But the new Russia (and the new China) has torn that formula apart: Russian popular culture is Westernised, and people drive BMWs, play the stock market, and listen to Taylor Swift all while cheering anti-Western rhetoric and celebrating American downfall.<sup>43</sup>

This does not mean that a revisionist state will correctly estimate the strength of status quo powers' response. In fact, if the status quo powers are democracies and a revisionist state is authoritarian, the latter is likely to underestimate the likelihood of a coordinated response. The conventional wisdom in IR is that democracies take longer to mobilize for aggressive responses than authoritarian states, but once they do they strike back hard and persistently. In a sense, their response is similar to that of the American legal system's proverbial response to crime – the wheels of justice grind slowly, but extremely fine.

The lesson is that a revisionist state is more likely to raid a neighboring state if the latter's status quo allies have demonstrable problems in coordinate their policies. An example of this is the requirement in the EU for major policies, such as economic sanctions on Russia, to be approved by all member states. One implication of this reasoning is that Russia's militarized territorial revisionism is more likely with respect to the former Soviet republics in Europe rather than in Asia. Whereas the Kremlin may expect to offer selective incentives to individual EU states – as well as to play the EU against the United States – and thus slow down the Western response to the violation of territorial

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, "How Putin Is Reinventing Warfare," *Foreign Policy*, May 5, 2014. Accessed November 14, 2014: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/05/05/how\\_putin\\_is\\_reinventing\\_warfare](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/05/05/how_putin_is_reinventing_warfare)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

integrity of its allies, its putative territorial takeovers from Kazakhstan to Mongolia risk alarming China – an economic powerhouse with rising military capabilities and a population nine times larger than Russia's. If the Kremlin surmises that China's response would not be subject to collective action constraints such as those of the EU and NATO, it may desist in territorial revisionism against Central Asian states, which developed significant economic and political ties with China.<sup>44</sup>

The logic of collective action, however, does not systematically explain why militarized border revisionism may take different forms or when political and economic substitutes may be more plausible. For this, we turn to the theory of the minimal winning coalitions.

### **Controlled Borderlessness**

In his 1962 book, *The Theory of Political Coalitions*, William Riker showed – counterintuitively – that politicians running for office seek not to maximize their votes, but to win with the minimum number of votes needed. To do so, they pursue minimal-size winning coalitions.<sup>45</sup> This gives them victory at the lowest cost. Applied to territorial revisionism, this theory suggests that an expansionist state would weigh up its options and choose those that enable it to reach its expansionist goals at the lowest cost. The operative concept here is that of expansionist goals. A state does not have to conquer all the territory of a neighboring state to extend their dominion over them, nor does it need to redraw and reorganize all the borders. A state only needs to exert a minimal level of effort to secure controlling influence over a neighbor. In the case of great power territorial revisionism, the functional equivalent of building a minimal winning coalition would be a peaceful integration of neighboring states into an economic and political union dominated by the expansionist power. In such a union, even with *pro forma* sovereign equality among members, the revisionist would be guaranteed the dominant role through a predominance of population, military power, and economic resources. The latter would give the revisionist power credible leverage to raid its neighbors. It follows that the revisionist power would only need to resort to militarized coercion if its leadership comes to believe that the nonviolent integration of a neighbor into such a union has become impossible or infeasible. In that sense the behavioral logic of a revisionist power would follow Sun Tzu's recommendations in his *Art of War*: "...the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this... For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."<sup>46</sup>

From this standpoint, a state only needs to exert a minimal level of effort to secure controlling influence over a neighbor; hence, in the post-Soviet area, borders of states viewed as eventually willing to integrate into a Eurasian Union are likely to be respected and unchallenged by Russia, yet borders of states viewed as willing to join other interstate border regimes are likely to be

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<sup>44</sup> Of particular concern to Moscow would be the loss of energy deals and China's withdrawal from developing international financial institutions that could become an alternative to the Bretton Woods system.

<sup>45</sup> William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

<sup>46</sup> *Sun Tzu Strategies*, an independent analysis of Sun Tzu works website. Accessed November 15, 2014: <http://www.suntzustrategies.com/resources/six-principles-of-sun-tzu-the-art-of-business>

contested, violated, and revised. This logic would explain how a revisionist state may escalate territorial pressure on its neighbors and how it may mix and match coercive strategies. On the ascending scale, these strategies would run from persuasion through dialog to economic and political threats to economic sanctions and political interference. If the latter don't work, the expansionist state would have the motive to use military power. That conclusion in itself is rather obvious. But the minimal winning coalition logic – importantly for the case of post-Soviet borders in particular – goes beyond that. Specifically, it would explain why an expansionist state would use different *militarized* revisionist strategies. Russia's post-Soviet history suggests three types of these strategies, on the ascending scale.

The first strategy would be military support to a state whose territorial claims on the revisionist power's neighboring state would constrain the latter from joining other political and economic unions and keep alive the prospect of its incorporation into a revisionist state's led union. An example would be Russia's support for Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan. As this leverage is available, Russia's leadership can count on influencing Azerbaijan without military intervention.

The second strategy is military intervention into a neighboring state on behalf of a separatist or irredentist region within that state (which the expansionist state could empower in advance). This could be accompanied by the claim of the necessity for humanitarian intervention – all the way to evoking the United Nations' principle of "Responsibility to Protect" that authorized humanitarian intervention of a state – as was the case of Russia's 58<sup>th</sup> Army moving into Georgia in August 2008 with the stated mission to protect ethnic South Ossetians, most of whom were also Russian citizens. Similarly, Russian forces intervened in Georgia's separatist territory of Abkhazia and in Moldova's separatist territory of Transnistria in the early 1990s. In all these cases, Russia's military support ensured the *de facto* loss of Georgia's and Moldova's sovereignty over these territories. While formally the interstate borders of Georgia and Moldova remained the same, in practice, the territorial boundaries where these states could exercise sovereignty diminished. Russia's military intervention in East Ukraine in 2014 falls into the same category – the difference being that it has been more gradual and piecemeal and costly than the Georgia and Moldova interventions.

The third major strategy was the conquest of a part of a neighboring state's territory followed by its annexation. Conquest, following the MID dataset, occurs when one state acquires the territory of another state with its armed forces as "the primary agent of the territorial change." This includes takeovers that take place "with a bare minimum of force" and where "no organized military resistance was encountered." Annexation, according to MID, occurs "when one political entity unilaterally extends its sovereignty over another political entity." Russia's incorporation of Crimea in March 2014 exemplifies this strategy. Military power was decisively and efficiently used to change the Crimea government leadership, take control of the infrastructure and police, isolate the Ukrainian military in their bases, suppress public protest, disconnect Ukrainian electronic broadcast media and seize control of the isthmus connecting Crimea to the rest of Ukraine, roughly along the administrative border of the Crimea Autonomous Republic within Ukraine. While the military exercised this control, a referendum was hastily conducted to endorse Crimea's inclusion into Russia.

As a result Russia enlarged the territory and population under its control.

One common denominator in this variation – consistent with the minimal winning coalition logic – is that in each case Russia could have used more military power and/or taken over larger territories (particularly in Georgia and Ukraine), but it did not. The pattern of Russia’s territorial revisionism in the neighboring states has been clear: to deny them control at the lowest military cost of enough territory to destabilize them politically and economically so as to make them vulnerable to Moscow’s pressure.

The minimal winning coalition logic, in fact, also indicates that a revisionist state would alternate the use of military force with economic and political measures. Significant conventional military buildups are costly. The key for the revisionist power, from the standpoint of the minimal winning coalition theory, would be to seize control of just enough borderland territory to ensure that it can apply military pressure on the target state at will, with a view of destabilizing it politically and economically from within. Thus, in the case of the Russia and Ukraine standoff, after Russia’s regular and mercenary forces removed Ukrainian border posts from the Luhansk region in June 2014, Russia shortly thereafter stopped supplying natural gas to Ukraine on credit and imposed embargoes on Ukraine’s agricultural exports. This gave Moscow the vantage point of flexibility. If economic pressure fails, it can increase its military support for the separatist provinces. If economic pressure succeeds, it can freeze the separatist conflicts and wait for the rising popular discontent to lead to desirable political changes – perhaps a government in Kyiv that would reverse its orientation toward the EU and move toward joining the Russia-led Eurasian Union. In Georgia, for example, the latter scenario was partly observed. While Russia’s August 2008 intervention remained limited to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the actively pro-EU and NATO government of Mikheil Saakashvili was defeated in the 2012 parliamentary and 2013 presidential elections. The Georgia Dream party whose leadership advocated closer cooperation with Russia and whom the Kremlin had reasons to see as more responsive to its influence arrived in power.

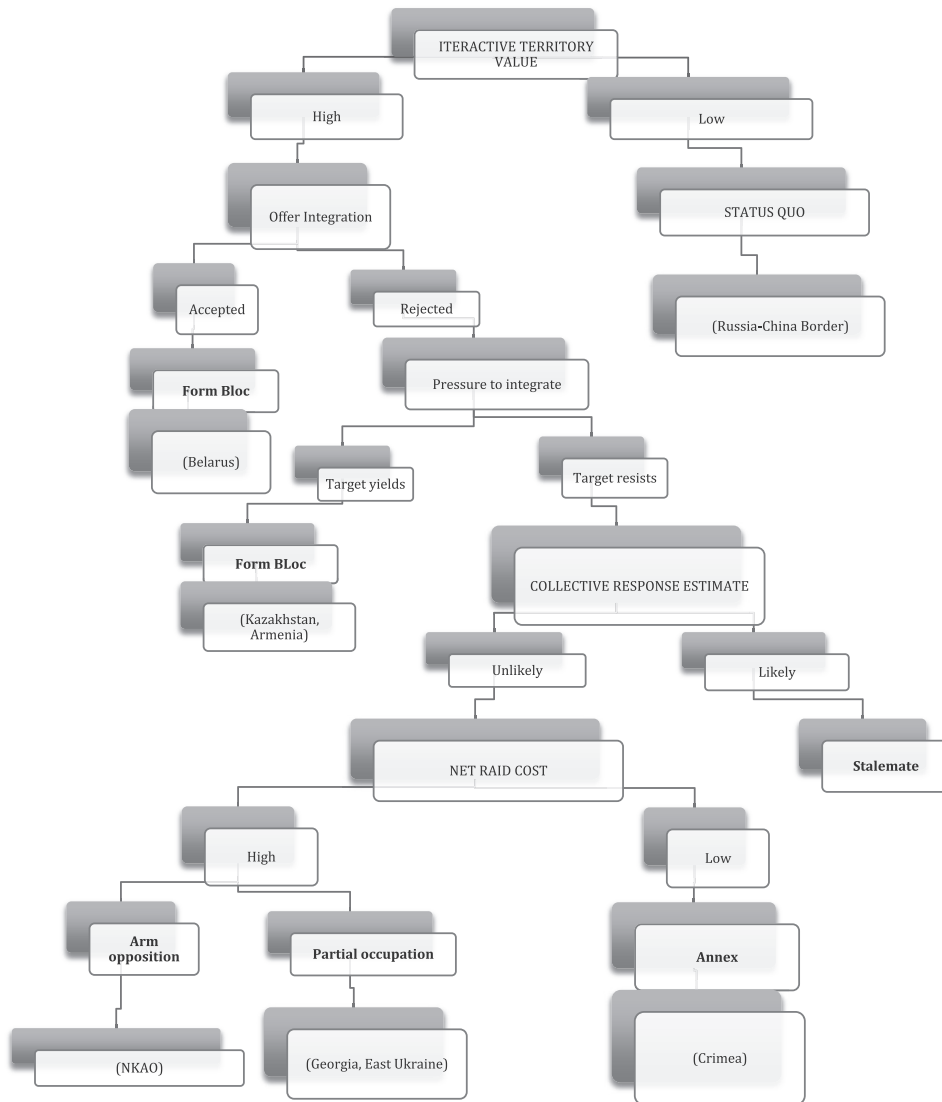
The minimal winning coalition logic also explains why Russia annexed Crimea so decisively and quickly. Given Ukraine’s physical, demographic, and economic geography, it is hard to imagine any other revisionist move that would have given Russia control over more valuable territorial assets and more residual leverage over Ukraine’s political and economic trajectories with lower military intervention.

### **The Synthetic Model of Territorial Revisionism**

In the real world, the interactive value of territory, the collective action problem among status quo powers, and cost-benefit valuations are complex and interactive. Yet, their effects can be modeled synthetically. I present an example of such a model in Figure 1 to explain where, why, and what form of territorial expansion a revisionist power may undertake. This model is interactive, i.e., the outcomes in it are contingent on what the revisionist power does and how other powers respond. The three key factors are marked in capital letters, outcomes in bold.

This model systematically explains the puzzle of Russia’s territorial and border policy





**Figure 1: A Synthetic Interactive Model of Territorial Revisionism**

variation laid out at the start of the paper. Russia did not pursue expansionist revisionism with respect to territories whose interactive value was relatively low. The low interactive value was due to the infeasibility of integrating these neighboring states into any kind of Russia-led interstate bloc, combined with participation with the same states in common interstate blocs, notably APEC. This pertains to Russia’s border agreements with China in the 1990s culminating in the final border settlement agreement ratification by the State Duma in 2005 as well as the non-advancement of territorial claims on Mongolia, Japan, and North Korea.

The model also shows that while the nominal absence of territorial claims was the same with respect to Kazakhstan, the reason why Russia has not undertaken militarized territorial revisionism there is most likely different. Unlike Russia’s East Asian neighbors, Kazakhstan has a high interactive

territorial value for Russia as a key member of the Eurasian Union. However, Kazakhstan accepted Russia's inducements and pressure to join it in a Eurasian Union, especially given the vulnerability of its long land border with Russia. The model also shows that Kazakhstan has a second line of defense – the shadow of China. Even if it resisted Russia's pressures for integration into the Eurasian Union, Russia would be wary to infringe on China's interests in Kazakhstan. Additionally, Kazakhstan has little prospect of joining the European Union and it has no similar political and economic interstate blocs to join in Asia. It appears that by not joining international blocs outside of Russia, by acceding to the Eurasian Union, and by developing significant economic and political ties with China, Kazakhstan reduced the likelihood of Russia's territorial claims and militarized intervention. At issue is not whether Russia had exerted or considered exerting military pressure on Kazakhstan to join the Eurasian Union, but that these factors reduced the likelihood of such pressure being exerted.

The Baltic States have also remained and are likely to remain outside the sphere of Russia's territorial revisionism, mostly because the collective response to it, given these states' NATO membership, is likely to be strong.

Finally, the model also explains Russia's differentiated engagement in militarized territorial revisionism vis-à-vis Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Azerbaijan (through support of Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh/NKAO). The model also shows why Crimea was more likely to be annexed than other borderland territories.

### **Thinking out of Sample: Micro-case Demonstrations**

The presentation of the model would be incomplete without an out-of-sample probe. What can it say about empirical cases that were not considered while conceptually designing the model? Two kinds of such cases offer a particular strong probe. The first one can be described as the dog-that-didn't-bark cases. Can the model account for the absence of Russia's militarized territorial revisionism where one would expect it as likely, based on other cases? The second kind is the reverse – can it account for persisting or increasing projection of military power in the revision of territory where one would expect it to be less likely based on the conventional wisdom and precedent?

#### *The Dog That Didn't Bark: Russia's Lezgin Enclave in Azerbaijan*

If intrinsic and relational value of territory or border settlement or opportunistic great-power expansionism or all of the above were key factors and if the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine or Abkhazia served as precedent, it would be reasonable to expect Russia to use military force or to threaten such use in parts of Northern Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, the case in point would be territories populated predominantly by ethnic Lezgins around the villages of Khrakh-Uba and Uryan-Uba. Like ethnic Russian populations in Russia and Ukraine and ethnic Ossetian populations in Russia and Georgia, the ethnic Lezgin population became divided as a result of the Soviet Union's collapse, with the majority residing in Russia's Dagestan and a minority becoming what David Laitin called "a beached diaspora" in Azerbaijan. As in Crimea, a territorial

dispute has its origins in conflicting interpretations of the Soviet legacy – in fact, even dating to the same year (1954).<sup>47</sup> Allegedly, the ethnic Lezgin settlements ended up in the then Soviet republic of Azerbaijan as a result of the 1954 Soviet government resolution on exchange of territory between Dagestan and Azerbaijan. As in South Ossetia, most Lezgins in those villages took on Russian citizenship after the Soviet collapse. The Azerbaijan government insisted they should take Azeri citizenship, yet they did not guarantee the Lezgins what the latter believed were their historical property rights. During the 1990s, these Lezgin areas became de facto Russian enclaves in Azerbaijan. As citizens of Russia, their residents voted in Russia's elections, received their pensions and social security payments from Russia, studied in Russian schools, and served in the Russian armed forces.<sup>48</sup> Though with a population of only about 250 people, the larger of the Lezgin settlements, Khrakh Uba, boasted a strategic location on the Caspian Sea – rich in marine and carbohydrate resources. In that sense, it had a positional value somewhat resembling Crimea (due to substantial natural gas reserves discovered in the Black Sea).

Azerbaijan, however, considered these settlements illegal – the same way as the government of Georgia considered Russia's granting of citizenship to ethnic Ossetians and Abkhazians illegal. Moreover, Baku took a tougher line than Tbilisi and undertook measures to force or induce the Lezgins to leave their historic settlements – these included arrests, confiscations, and forced property selloffs at below-market price. Nevertheless in September 2010, Russia's then *de jure* president, Dmitry Medvedev and the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, signed the interstate border delineation agreement on the basis of the former Soviet border between the Russian Federation and the Soviet Azerbaijan. The agreement thus left the Lezgins within Azerbaijan, yet the status of this population was not resolved. The Lezgins vehemently protested. In May and September 2011 they petitioned the government of Russia's Dagestan to exert pressure on Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan, however, persisted in its expulsion policy. By April 2012, the last ethnic Lezgins left the settlement of Khrakh-Uba. In 2013, the Azerbaijanis renamed it as Palydly. The Russian enclave was gone.<sup>49</sup>

The parallels between Khrakh-Uba and other areas in the former Soviet Union where Russia intervened militarily did not evade ethnic Azerbaijanis who learned about the crisis as it unfolded. In social media, one finds numerous expressions of fear that Russia could use the crisis in Khrakh-Uba to intervene militarily in Azerbaijan. On the Internet forum *Disput.Az*, one user, nicknamed Guru, characterized the Lezgin protests as “Russian provocations aiming to create here another Transnistria, Karabakh, or South Ossetia.” Yet, none of these cases ended up as a viable precedent. Russia did not intervene militarily to secure Lezgin territories.

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<sup>47</sup> The year when Moscow transferred Crimea from the Russian Federation to the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic.

<sup>48</sup> Milrad Fatullayev, “Ostat'sia v Rossii [To Stay in Russia],” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 2, 2011. Accessed November 15, 2014: [http://www.ng.ru/regions/2011-02-09/1\\_stay.html](http://www.ng.ru/regions/2011-02-09/1_stay.html)

<sup>49</sup> Mairbek Agaiev, “Khrakh na grani krakha [Khrakh on the Edge of Collapse],” *Chernovik* (Dagestan), May 27, 2011. Accessed November 15, 2014: <http://chernovik.net/content/novosti/hrah-na-grani-kraha>; Fatullayev, “Ostat'sia v Rossii”; “The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (I), Ethnicity and Conflict,” *International Crisis Group* October 19 (2012). Accessed November 15, 2014: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/caucasus/220-the-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-i-ethnicity-and-conflict.pdf>

The synthetic interactive model, however, explains this non-interference. First, the interactive value of Azerbaijan was hardly compelling. Being an authoritarian state not bordering on any EU or NATO member-state, it appeared unlikely to join these organizations. Therefore, it would be in play for Moscow to exercise its influence there without the use of force. Second, the Kremlin could consider it had a potent lever on Azerbaijan through participation in the Minsk group on Nagorno-Karabakh, with an additional leverage through the threat of providing military assistance to Armenia or militarily intervening on its behalf over Nagorno-Karabakh.

*The Dog Still Barking: Russia-Georgia Borders and the WTO*

If international agreements on borders, international regimes, and economic incentives from trade matter, then the border deal between Georgia and Russia that paved the way for the latter in 2011 to join the World Trade Organization could be expected to result in better relations between Russia and Georgia, including a reduction in Russia's military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and perhaps even Moscow's moves toward compromise on the status of these largely unrecognized entities within the international system. On November 9, 2011, Russia and Georgia signed the intergovernmental agreement "On the Basic Principles of the Mechanism of Custom Administration and Monitoring of Trade in Goods" in Geneva. In it, Russia and Georgia pledged to adhere to "the standards of the World Trade Organization with a view to making trade easier by implementing the best customs and monitoring practices." The two sides committed to the international norms favoring the lowering of tariffs and trade barriers. Moscow agreed that joining the WTO was "an opportunity for improving the transparency of its trade data in accordance with ... GATT-94" [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1994 provisions]. Russia thus agreed to follow WTO data-sharing procedures.<sup>50</sup>

Specifically, the Russian government agreed to provide its trade data through the WTO's Electronic Data Exchange System (EDES) and the International Monitoring System (IMS). Russia and Georgia authorized a "Private Neutral Company" – to be identified, contracted, and funded jointly by Russia and Georgia with procedures to be monitored by Switzerland – to obtain EDES data, establish a presence at trade terminals, "manage risks," and audit reports on trade through these terminals. The two governments also agreed to invite representatives from the designated neutral company to visit the terminals and discuss their experiences and best practices to improve operations.

In addition, Russia and Georgia agreed to apply "electronic seals" and use a GPS/GPRS system "to track the movement of cargos after their passing through trade terminals into the trade corridors." The agreement designated three such corridors between Russia and Georgia demarcated

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<sup>50</sup> "Soglashenie mezhdru pravitel'stvom Rossiiskoi Federatsii i pravitel'stvom Gruzii ob osnovnykh printsipakh mekhanizma tamozhennogo administrirovaniia i monitoringa torgovli tovarami [The Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of Georgia on the Basic Principles of Customs Administration and Monitoring of Trade in Goods]," *KonsultantPlus Dataset*. Accessed July 1, 2013: <http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=INT;n=53598>

with the Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) coordinate system.<sup>51</sup>

However, subsequent developments soon revealed that the agreement failed to bring the sides closer on the issue of Georgia's territorial sovereignty. The Georgian government hoped that even though Russian troops continued to back up de facto independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, at least Tbilisi could regain control over its violated boundaries, if not the entire territory within them. As the former president Saakashvili said, "...for the first time after Georgia's independence, international monitoring of the movement of goods will begin within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia."<sup>52</sup>

Russia's representative, Aleksandr Lukashevich, however, made it clear that this would not be the case. Moscow, he said, could rely on the WTO to actually endorse its view of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign territories, because Russia recognized them as such. Thus, he said that Russia did not consider itself obligated to report on trade flows to Georgia through two of the three border corridors designated in the 2011 Georgia-Russia customs and trade agreement. Russia would report its trade with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Lukashevich stated, under WTO rules and procedures as international trade, separately and on par with its trade with Georgia. According to Lukashevich, compliance with WTO procedures – including the provision of trade statistics to EDES and IMS – will thus become “an important attribute of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent customs-control territories and of the status of their borders with Georgia as customs borders analogous to the Russian-Georgian border with its crossing at Verkhniy Lars-Kazbegi,” where Russia and Georgia border directly, not through areas with disputed sovereignty status. Lukashevich also argued that by signing the 2011 agreement Tbilisi both invalidated Georgia's law on occupied territories declaring direct international travel and shipments to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as illegal and abrogated, in international legal terms, its earlier stated right to restore Georgia's border terminals with Russia at the Psou River (Abkhazia) and Roki Tunnel (South Ossetia).<sup>53</sup>

Nearly three years later, the border dispute remains. Georgia recognizes only one of the three border checkpoints with Russia (Lars-Kazbegi) as a legitimate interstate border crossing and considers the other two as illegal. Russia, however, does not recognize that its borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia are Russia-Georgia borders. The Russian military presence has since remained as strong as ever. A former Russian military serviceman who fought in the 2008 August war in South Ossetia posted extensive photo reports on *Livejournal*, Russia's largest Internet public platform, showing significant changes on the ground – the Russian military moved from tents and trailer-style huts into new permanent well-furnished billeting areas. In other words, Russia's involvement in

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Maka Gurgenidze, “Georgia, Russia Arrive at WTO Deal,” *Central Asia Caucasus Institute*, November 16, 2011. Accessed June 29, 2013: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5671>

<sup>53</sup> “Otvety ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID Rossii A. K. Lukashevicha na voprosy agentstva ‘Interfaks’ o rossiisko-gruzinskom soglashenii v kontekste vstupleniia Rossii v VTO, No. 2051-23-12-2011 [Responses of the official representative of Russia's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, A. K. Lukashevich to the questions of the Interfax news agency regarding the Russia-Georgia agreement in the context of Russia's joining of WTO],” *Interfax* 2051, December 23, 2011. Accessed October 10, 2015: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/198234/>

militarized territorial revisionism in Georgia became more entrenched.

Other developments, however, explained why this increasing military presence remained – at least so far – confined to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and not extended to other parts of Georgia or to Georgia as a whole. As the Kremlin hoped, the Saakashvili government and its decisively pro-Western ruling coalition were defeated in parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012, with more Moscow-friendly politicians entering the scene. Moscow acquired means to leverage Georgian politics from within. According to South Caucasus regional experts, the Kremlin exercised this leverage in November 2014, persuading Georgia’s Prime Minister, Irakliy Garibashvili, to dismiss his defense minister, Irakliy Alasaniya, two weeks after he held meetings with NATO representatives on an agreement to base NATO’s air defense facilities in Georgia.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, on the one hand, Georgia’s continued movement toward the EU could be seen as a potential loss of its interactive value for Russia – hence, the continued mass military presence in Abkhazia and Ossetia. At the same time, the minimal winning coalition logic explained why further spread of military power halted, as the Kremlin saw compelling indications that it could politically leverage Georgia away from the EU and bring it closer to Russia.

### **Implications: Borders in World Politics**

It should be stressed that this study does not argue that intrinsic and relational values of territory do not matter. Borders continue to play their important multiple roles identified in traditional scholarship. The analysis, however, calls for a more nuanced understanding of the role of borders in international relations. It calls for making a three-way distinction in this regard. First, we still have a significant number of cases where border disputes center on the precise location of borderlines or on functional issues concerning border crossings. Second, it goes without saying that a significant number of border disputes may result from greed-based territorial revisionism – as states may pursue access to resources or inclusion of new populations. It appears, for example, that a considerable number of border disputes around islands in the Pacific Ocean involving China, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and other states are driven by intrinsic (resource) value of these territories.

The third case, largely analyzed in this study, reflects another, less theorized aspect of borders in world politics. It is, in essence, the case of border disputes used not for the sake of borders or territorial control they ensure, but as leverage for changing the entire geopolitical and/or domestic political orientation of one’s neighboring states. It is, by and large, the case of “controlled borderlessness” – when one state takes part of its border with a neighboring state under unilateral control, when it removes border protections the neighboring state has while leaving its own intact. This move is akin to inserting the tip of a knife’s blade between a person’s ribs and leaving it there,

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<sup>54</sup> Beslan Kmuzov and Inna Kukudzhanova, “Ostavki v Gruzii budet Imet’ vneshnepoliticheskie posledstviia, shchtaiat politologi [Resignations in Georgia will have Foreign Policy Implications, Political Pundits Figure],” *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, November 6, 2014. Accessed November 15, 2014: <http://south-osetia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251910/>

always threatening to twist it when needed. With the neighboring state rendered partially borderless, the revisionist power could influence its developments over a long period of time toward desired long-term goals.

It is, finally, worth noting that the case of post-Soviet Russia is not the only possible example of “controlled borderlessness” in international politics. It may, for now, apply less to other parts of the world. However, as globalization brings about more densely integrated interstates blocs and coalitions, the logic of interactive territorial value would become more pertinent to other cases. Selective border liberalization or closures are then likely to play a more important part in international dynamics, in ways that shape preferences differently than straightforward power incentives, institutional constraints, temptations to free ride, or incentives to misrepresent. It is worth here quoting from the conclusion of the 2011 computer-simulated evolutionary IPD competition analysis: “...group strategies outperform cooperative strategies. Group strategies coexist with cooperative strategies if the size of their group is small. Once a group grows large enough, it expels other groups and finally becomes the sole survivor. Thus, group strategies have a higher rate of winning than any singleton IPD strategy.”<sup>55</sup> Across Eurasia, the interactive dynamic between the EU and the Eurasian Union could thus well emerge as most decisive in shaping and reshaping the contours of interstate borders well into the twenty-first century.

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<sup>55</sup> Li, Hingston, and Kendall, “Winning Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma Competitions,” 358.