Closing Pandora's Box: Can Shared Vulnerability Underpin Territorial Stability?

Jamie Hintson[a]* and Kenneth A. Schultz[b]

[a]Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA
[b]Department of Political Science, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
*Corresponding author. Email: jhintson@stanford.edu

Abstract Scholars and policymakers have argued that territorial revisionism is dangerous because it risks setting off a cascade of claims by states dissatisfied with their borders. This Pandora's box logic suggests that states that are vulnerable to an unraveling of the status quo have incentives to restrain their territorial ambitions to preserve stability. This paper explores this claim theoretically and empirically. It provides descriptive evidence to determine whether vulnerability to territorial threats has historically been associated with a lower likelihood of initiating territorial disputes. We find some evidence of such an effect in postindependence Africa, where this logic is most frequently invoked, and to some extent in Asia, but not in other regions. To help explain these empirical observations, we develop a multistate model of territorial conflict that identifies the conditions under which cooperation to preserve the territorial status quo can be sustained. The model shows that while an equilibrium of mutual restraint can exist, the necessary conditions are quite restrictive, and this cooperative equilibrium is never unique. Thus while a Pandora's box of potential claims can provide the basis for a norm of restraint, the emergence of such a norm is neither straightforward nor guaranteed.

> All jokes aside. If someone is willing to reconsider the results of World War II, let us discuss this. But then we will have to discuss not only Kaliningrad, but also the eastern lands of Germany, the city of Lvov, a former part of Poland, and so on, and so forth. There are also Hungary and Romania on the list. If someone wants to open this Pandora's box and deal with it, all right, go for it then.
>
> —Russian President Vladimir Putin, 1 September 2016[1]

1. Interview with Bloomberg, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52830>.

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On 22 February 2022, the United Nations Security Council met to consider the growing crisis between Russia and Ukraine. Russia had just issued decrees recognizing the independence of breakaway regions of Ukraine inhabited by large numbers of Russian speakers, and military conflict seemed imminent. At this meeting, the Kenyan ambassador to the UN, Martin Kimani, condemned Russia's effort to justify intervention on the grounds of its ethnic and historical attachment to those lands, citing the experience of Africa:

> Today, across the border of every single African country, live our countrymen with whom we share deep historical, cultural and linguistic bonds. At independence, had we chosen to pursue states on the basis of ethnic, racial or religious homogeneity, we would still be waging bloody wars these many decades later.[2]

Kimani's observation reflects a common view of postindependence Africa, where colonial borders were generally accepted even when they partitioned people with shared identity. Scholars often attribute this outcome to "Pandora's box" logic: the idea that territorial revisionism was dangerous because it threatened to set off a chain of claims and counterclaims.[3] For example, Zartman writes "The greatest deterrent to territorial revisionism has been the fear of opening Pandora's Box. If any one boundary is seriously questioned, why not all the boundaries in Western Africa?"[4] In this view, the fear of widespread conflict created incentives for states to cooperate in restraining their territorial ambitions.

But Africa is not the only region where this logic might apply. As the Putin quote in the epigraph suggests, many borders around the world reflect the legacy of past conquests and compromises that have separated countries from historical possessions and/or ethnic kin. Zacher, in his foundational work on the origins of the territorial integrity norm, suggests that vulnerability to widespread irredentism encouraged acceptance of this norm throughout newly decolonized regions where borders cut across ethnic groups.[5] Similarly, Acharya and Lee argue that states in the modern world collude in maintaining a system in which each has uncontested control within its territorial limits. Although efforts to redistribute territory occur, this "cartel system" is buttressed by expectations that borders are interdependent, so that failure in one place threatens failures elsewhere.[6] Policymakers invoke a similar logic to argue for efforts to confront territorial aggressors. Speaking to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, US President Joseph Biden argued that support for Ukraine was necessary to ensure the security of other states: "If we allow

2. Kimani's quotation was reported on NPR, 22 February 2022. <http://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082334172/kenya-security-council-russia>.
3. Foltz 1991; Herbst 1989; Kacowicz 1998; Young 1991; Zartman 1966.
4. Zartman 1966, 109.
5. Zacher 2001, 241–42.
6. Acharya and Lee 2023, 36–37.

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Ukraine to be carved up, is the independence of any nation secure? I'd respectfully suggest the answer is no."[7] All of these arguments suggest that the territorial status quo can easily unravel due to widespread dissatisfaction and that fear of this chaos can induce cooperation to keep Pandora's box closed.

Despite its intuitive appeal, Pandora's box logic has not been systematically examined either theoretically or empirically. Does vulnerability to territorial threats deter states from making claims that would upset the status quo? Can widespread vulnerability support cooperation around a norm of mutual restraint and, if so, under what conditions? Although it is plausible that Pandora's box logic contributed to the decision to respect colonial borders in Africa, it is unclear if this dynamic generalizes beyond this case. For example, we do not observe the same outcome in Latin America, where border disputes were almost universal in spite of an expressed desire to preserve the colonial-era status quo.[8] And, as the epigraph reminds us, recognition of Pandora's box logic did not prevent Putin from reasserting Russian imperial designs.

Here, we make two main contributions, one empirical and one theoretical. First, we provide descriptive evidence to assess whether vulnerability to territorial threats has been associated with a lower likelihood of initiating territorial disputes. Most research on the origins of territorial conflicts assumes a bilateral setting in which the probability of a dispute between two states is a function of dyadic characteristics[9] or systemic conditions.[10] Pandora's box logic, by contrast, suggests that states might fear that making a challenge against one neighbor will invite future threats to their own territory from third-party states. To what extent does this consideration affect the probability of a dispute?

To answer this question, we examine whether the probability that a state initiates a claim against a neighbor is influenced by the state's vulnerability to potential claims by third parties. Using several indicators of potential claims, including historical losses and the partitioning of politically powerful ethnic groups, we find evidence for such a relationship in sub-Saharan Africa and, though somewhat weaker, in Asia. In other regions, the existence of potential claims on would-be challengers has no effect on the likelihood of a dispute or actually *increases* the risks of revisionism. Moreover, at the regional level, we find no evidence that regions with more widespread vulnerability to potential claims experienced fewer territorial disputes. For example, vulnerability to claims was quite prevalent in the Middle East and Latin America, but there is no evidence of a pacifying effect in those regions.

Our theoretical contribution seeks to understand these observations. We develop a formal model that explores whether mutual restraint can arise as an equilibrium in the

7. The text of Biden's speech can be found at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speechesremarks/2023/09/19/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-78th-session-of-the-united-nations-generalassembly-new-york-ny/>.
8. Lalonde 2003.
9. See, for example, Abramson and Carter 2016; Cederman et al. 2024; Huth 1996; Lee 2024.
10. Abramson and Carter 2021.

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presence of widespread vulnerability to threats from neighbors. The model is a multistate generalization of the standard two-state bargaining model, in which the states and their borders are captured by a network of nodes and edges.[11] In each period, states have an option to contest one or more borders in order to change the allocation of territory at some cost to both.

We show that a cooperative equilibrium is possible within groups of states where all those who want to revise one or more borders are also vulnerable to challenges by their neighbors. Within such "islands of stability," the status quo can be sustained through history-dependent strategies in which any challenge will cause all dissatisfied states to challenge their borders. The model also shows how widespread dissatisfaction within a region can generate incentives for powerful states to police the territorial status quo for fear of its unraveling. Thus stability can arise either from the bottom up, through cooperation among mutually vulnerable states, or from the top down, if powerful states have incentives to punish revisionism.

At the same time, the model identifies a number of ways in which this logic can fail. The conditions needed for a stable equilibrium to emerge are quite restrictive. Not only do particular parameter conditions have to be met, but the the spatial configuration of potential claims has to have a particular, cyclical structure. These requirements can easily be violated, particularly in the presence of powerful states with revisionist aims. Moreover, even when the necessary conditions exist, mutual restraint is never the unique equilibrium: widespread dissatisfaction can also lead to widespread territorial revisionism. Finally, the model assumes the existence of a mutually agreed status quo, and cooperation can fail when this condition is not met due to ill-defined boundaries.

Thus Pandora's box logic can induce stability, but it does not do so in a straightforward or automatic way. Instead, coordination on an equilibrium of restraint is inherently contingent, not only on the underlying material conditions, but also on the emergence of ideas, norms, and institutions that support coordination on a cooperative equilibrium. This indeterminacy is not just a nuisance for empirical testing but a fundamental feature of the interaction. While this logic helps explain territorial stability in parts of the developing world, it does not operate universally.

Pandora's Logic

Scholars observe that a territorial integrity norm proscribing the acquisition of territory through the threat or use of force became an important feature of international politics after World War II,[12] though there is disagreement over its effects.[13] Here, we focus on one particular argument about the norm that roots its origins in the fears that territorial revisionism in one place could set off a chain reaction leading to widespread conflict.

11. Krainin and Wiseman 2016.
12. Atzili 2012; Fazal 2011; Hensel, Allison, and Khanani 2009; Korman 1996; Zacher 2001.
13. See, for example, Altman 2020; MacDonald 2009.

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In principle, this Pandora's box logic could operate through two different mechanisms. The first rests on expectations that violations of the norm will lead to reciprocal noncompliance—a standard mechanism of norm self-enforcement in institutionalist theories.[14] In this bottom-up mechanism, the norm induces mutual restraint: every state foregoes its territorial ambitions in expectation that others will too. Since compliance is driven by vulnerability to an unraveling of restraint, this mechanism hinges on the existence of widespread vulnerability. A second, top-down mechanism rests on the idea that some states may have an interest in and ability to keep the lid on Pandora's box by enforcing compliance on others. In this view, the chaos unleashed by territorial revisionism would impose sufficient indirect costs on one or more states that they have incentive to punish aggressors to keep the system from unraveling.[15]

Although we focus primarily on the former mechanism, the two mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. In his classic discussion of the norm, Zacher invokes both logics, suggesting that potential challengers had to fear both opposition from Western powers and the risks of inciting new irredentist claims.[16] Indeed, the two mechanisms may reinforce one another. In their work on the nuclear nonproliferation regime, Coe and Vaynman argue that potential proliferators may be deterred both by the threat of sanctions from superpowers and by the fear that their nuclear acquisition will be reciprocated by others in the region.[17] At the same time, the prospect of unraveling creates incentives for the superpowers to deter the hardest cases. We will consider the interaction between these top-down and bottom-up sources of stability later.

As noted, Pandora's box logic has been most commonly invoked to explain the relative rarity of territorial conflicts in Africa and the early adoption of a territorial integrity norm through the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The most extended treatment is by Herbst, who argues that the lack of clear geographic or demographic frontiers in Africa made any system of boundaries artificial and, potentially, unstable.[18] This led to a strategy of specific reciprocity, according to which each state refrains from attacking the territorial control of others, as long as others do likewise. Herbst argues that the resulting equilibrium was stable because the implications of its unraveling were severe: "precisely because all parties know that once African boundaries begin to change there would be an indefinite period of chaos … the grave danger of not cooperating is clear to all."[19] Indeed, Herbst argues that the danger was so "self-evident" that it is unclear whether the OAU and its endorsement of the territorial integrity norm were even needed to sustain it.[20] Young makes a similar

14. See, for example, Keohane 1984.

15. This argument is related to "domino theory," the expectation that one bad event can unleash a chain reaction whose cumulative effect is so bad that the first event has to be prevented, even at high cost.

16. Zacher 2001, 241–43.

17. Coe and Vaynman 2015.

18. Herbst 1989. Paine, Qui, and Ricart-Huguet argue that African borders are less arbitrary than often suggested, with many following major water bodies or the boundaries of precolonial states. Even so, they acknowledge the widespread partitioning of ethnic groups without precolonial states; see Paine, Qiu, and Ricart-Huguet 2025.

19. Herbst 1989, 689.

20. Ibid., 680.

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argument that the decision to leave colonial boundaries unchanged reflected the extreme risks of doing otherwise: "The fervor with which uti possidetis was adopted reflected the elemental imperatives of survival."[21]

Even though this is a relatively conventional view with respect to postcolonial Africa, the underlying theory has not been fully specified nor tested. Goemans and Schultz present some evidence of such a deterrent effect, showing that states in Africa were less likely to initiate claims when their borders partitioned many ethnic groups.[22] This finding is consistent with the idea that states are reluctant to advance claims for ethnic unification when they are also vulnerable to such claims, but there has been no effort to determine whether such an effect exists more generally.[23]

Even in the case of Africa, other explanations have been offered to explain the relative lack of territorial revisionism. In later work, for example, Herbst notes that African governments have long faced severe challenges in consolidating state control given low population density and difficult political geography.[24] As a result, he argues, most African states did not have incentives to grow larger, making territorial revisionism less attractive. Others have emphasized that, in the absence of effective state control over territory, African states relied on "juridical statehood" that prioritized international recognition of boundaries over efforts to change them.[25] Little evidence has been brought to bear to assess these explanations.

Testing Pandora's Logic

To evaluate the plausibility of the Pandora's box argument, we begin with a descriptive exercise: have states that are vulnerable to an unraveling of the territorial status quo been deterred from making claims to neighbors' territory? In particular, we consider two ways that states might suffer costs from opening Pandora's box. First, there is the risk that a state will become the target of territorial claims by third parties. Second, there might be negative externalities from conflicts in the state's neighborhood. The empirical question we seek to answer is whether these vulnerabilities have historically been associated with territorial restraint, either globally or in some regions.[26]

21. Young 1991, 329. See also, Foltz 1991, 352–53; Kacowicz 1998, 159.

22. Goemans and Schultz 2017.

23. In another related paper, Prorok and Huth 2015 argue that states may be unwilling to reopen settled disputes if doing so would undermine their legal position in disputes with other neighbors. Thus they share the idea that claims to lost territory might be deterred because the precedent they create could come back to harm the challenger. However, they focus on the deterrent effect of ongoing claims on potential challengers, whereas we consider the deterrent effect of potential claims that have not yet been made on the challenger.

24. Herbst 2000, chap. 5.

25. Jackson and Rosberg 1982.

26. In addition to these two vulnerabilities, states may also be vulnerable to *internal* territorial challenges from secessionist movements. These internal threats of secession could have a similar deterrent effect on claim making. Indeed, the territorial integrity norm is often interpreted as safeguarding a state's territory against internal challengers as well external ones. Moreover, Pandora's box logic is sometimes invoked to argue against support for secessionism out of fears that it will trigger demands by more groups. Although this is not the primary purpose of this paper, we address this issue in Appendix D and provide some

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To do so, we use data on the initiation of territorial claims from 1816 to 2001. Territorial disputes arise when one state publicly makes a claim to territory possessed or claimed by another. Claims represent the lowest level of territorial conflict because some claims never become the subject of threats of violence. But they represent an expressed desire to change the status quo at another state's expense. For that reason, claims are not costless because they can give rise to military preparations, disruptions in economic relations, and diplomatic costs.[27] Moreover, a claim can be made unilaterally, whereas militarized events are often the product of complicated strategic interactions.

Our sample consists of all directed dyad-years involving states that share a land border. Directed dyads are ordered pairs of states in which the first state is the potential challenger and the second state is the potential target.[28]

Measuring Claim Initiation

The dependent variable captures the initiation of a territorial claim by one state against another. We use data from the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) Project, which covers territorial claims from 1816 to 2001.[29] We exclude offshore island claims as well as claims over non-homeland or dependent territory (for example, colonial possessions).[30] For each directed dyad-year, the dependent variable equals 1 in the year that the challenger initiates a claim against the target, 0 in any year with no claim initiation, and missing in the event that a claim is ongoing in a given year.[31] Claim onsets are relatively rare, occurring in approximately 1 percent of directed dyad-years.

Identifying Potential Claims

To determine whether states are vulnerable to a breakdown of the territorial status quo, we construct several measures of potential claims. A potential claim exists when a state (the potential challenger) perceives something of value on the territory controlled by a neighbor (the potential target) that has not yet been the subject of an actual claim. By identifying potential claims in the system, we can derive, for each

empirical tests. These tests do not find support for the conjecture that states are less likely to make interstate territorial claims if they face an internal threat from secessionist or self-determination groups.

27. See, for example, Abramson and Carter 2016; Schultz 2017; Simmons 2005.

28. Data on state system membership and contiguity come from the Correlates of War (COW) Project 2017 and Stinnett et al. 2002.

29. Frederick, Hensel, and Macaulay 2017.

30. Although claims to off-shore islands are an important source of conflict, they tend to arise from conflicting views of maritime boundaries. Although there might be interdependencies among such disputes, they are unlikely to be seen as opening the door to terrestrial claims.

31. A dyad may experience more than one claim, either over a different piece of territory or in the event that a claim is resolved but later revived. If a new claim starts while a previous one is ongoing, we do not capture the new onset. Revivals of a previously settled claim are treated as new claim onsets. However, if a state exits and re-enters the state system, we do not count the re-initiation of its previous ongoing claims as new claim onsets.

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state, two measures that capture vulnerability to the activation of potential claims: (1) a state is vulnerable to potential claims when it is the potential target of one or more neighbors, and (2) a state is more vulnerable to territorial instability in its neighborhood the more potential claims exist in its vicinity.

Identifying potential claims is not straightforward, since what makes a territory valuable can vary with historical, demographic, and geographic conditions.[32] Historical and demographic conditions gave rise to different dynamics in different regions. For example, in the European and African contexts, definitions of homeland were often connected to ethnic identity, but this consideration is largely absent in Latin America, where homeland claims were generally rooted in (unclear) colonial borders. Moreover, if states seek territorial expansion for the sake of power and profit, they could, in principle, have incentives to make claims on all of their neighbors, simply waiting for the right conditions to arise. To deal with this, we capture states' latent incentives to make claims in several different ways.

Shared borders. Our first measure of a potential claim is the presence of a shared border. This indicator assumes that every border presents both an opportunity for expansion and a source of vulnerability that increases with the number of neighboring states.[33] A nice feature of this measure is that it is easy to observe and available for the entire time period of our data, and the number of countries that a state borders is plausibly exogenous to local dispute initiation. A significant downside is that research on the origins of territorial disputes suggests that not all borders are equally likely to be contested, suggesting that we need more refined indicators of potential claims.

Transborder ethnic kin. Prior work emphasizes that territorial claims are particularly likely when politically powerful groups in one state have kin residing in neighboring states.[34] We use data from the Transborder Ethnic Kin (TEK) Dataset and the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) data sets to capture this condition.[35] We say that there is a potential claim based on TEK if a group holding political power in one state also resides in the neighbor, where political power means being at least a senior partner in government.[36]

Although this variable has the advantage of capturing an important motive for territorial disputes, the TEK data are available starting in only 1946, which limits the temporal span of tests based on these data. For Europe, however, we can construct a

32. See, for example, Abramson and Carter 2016; Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Huth 1996; Huth and Allee 2002.

33. Note that, by virtue of the sample selection, all challenger-target directed dyads share a border, and are thus assumed to have a potential claim on this basis.

34. Abramson and Carter 2016; Cederman et al. 2025; Goemans and Schultz 2017; Huth 1996; Saideman 2001; Shelef 2016, 2020.

35. Vogt et al. 2015.

36. We do not condition on the group's access to power in the target state. Some disputes revolve around groups that are powerless or even discriminated against in the target state (for example, Somalia versus Ethiopia), but there are also disputes that center on unifying a group that is dominant in both states (for example, North versus South Vietnam). Empirical investigations revealed that an indicator that does not condition on the group's power in the target is a better predictor of actual disputes than one that does.

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similar indicator using the Historical Ethnic Group (HEG) data, which go back to 1886.[37] Tests performed on European subsamples use the HEG data.

Lost territory. The third proxy for potential claims is an indicator for whether a state previously lost territory to another. Territorial claims are often based on previous or historical ownership of a piece of territory.[38] In some cases, lost territory is associated with the partitioning of ethnic kin who lived there. In other cases, historical control may be associated with sites that are important for national or religious reasons. Moreover, political leaders can often mobilize support around the perceived injustice of the loss or the urge to restore an imagined "golden age."[39]

To code lost territories, we use the COW Territorial Change Dataset (TCD, Version 6), which compiles global territorial transfers since 1816.[40] Due to limitations in these data, however, we supplement them with information from other sources. The process for coding territorial losses is described at greater length in Appendix A. The result is a variable indicating, for each directed dyad-year, whether or not the potential target controlled territory that previously belonged to the potential challenger. This variable exists for the entire time span of the data, and not only for the post-1945 period.

A concern, however, is that losses are endogenous to territorial disputes: they are often the result of a previous claim. Losses could resolve rather than generate potential claims. Since there is no a priori way to identify losses that leave both sides satisfied and those that generate new grievance, we address this concern by coding only losses that arose before or at the birth of the dyad, generally because the territory was transferred during colonial rule or one state in the dyad seceded from the other. We also restrict the sample to observations up to the first dispute in the dyad, as these inherited losses are unlikely to affect subsequent disputes.[41]

Loss or TEK. Since territorial disputes might be motivated by either (or both) a historical loss or transborder kin, we also create an indicator that captures the presence of either source of potential claim. Although this combination captures different motives for potential claims, this variable inherits the constrained time frame of the TEK data and the endogeneity concern with the loss-based indicator, restricting tests to the post-1945 period (post-1886 for Europe) and observations that precede the first claim in a dyad. It is most useful, then, for newly decolonized regions.

As noted previously, the definition of potential claims excludes those that have already been activated and, potentially, resolved. Thus for example, if a state has TEK in a neighbor but has already made a territorial claim on that neighbor, the potential claim has been activated. Pandora's box logic implies that the deterrent effect, if any, should come from potential claims that have not yet given rise to an actual claim. Thus when using the TEK- and/or loss-based indicators, we identify a *potential* claim only if there has been no previous claim in the directed dyad during the spell of time

37. Müller-Crepon, Schvitz, and Cederman 2024.
38. Abramson and Carter 2016; Carter 2017; Murphy 1990.
39. Cederman et al. 2024.
40. Tir et al. 1998.
41. Alternative, less restrictive coding rules generate similar results, particularly in Africa and Asia. It should be noted that most dyads experience no claim (52 percent) or just one (30 percent).

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in which the TEK or loss existed.[42] However, when we measure potential claims with the number of shared borders, we include all of a state's borders in order to preserve the strict exogeneity of that measure.

Later, and in Appendix B, we present evidence showing that these indicators of potential claims do a good job of predicting actual claims in most regions. The presence of TEK and/or lost territory in the target state is strongly and positively correlated with claim initiation, nearly doubling the risk (or tripling, in the case of the combined indicator). This evidence gives us some confidence that states that host TEK and/or lost territory are vulnerable to a potential claim. These variables fare poorly, however, in the Americas, where ethnic politics were less salient and boundary disputes were often rooted in ambiguities in colonial-era borders.[43] Because this region has a very different historical experience, we will develop an alternative indicator for potential claims, using data compiled by Lee to identify areas that had elevated risk of claims due to changes in administrative borders or unclear jurisdiction prior to independence.[44] We defer the treatment of the region to Appendix E and, in what follows, omit the Americas from tests that use the TEK and/or loss indicators.

Measuring Vulnerability to Territorial Revisionism

Once we have identified potential claims, we generate several measures of vulnerability to a breakdown of territorial order. For each potential challenger i facing potential target j in year t, let K_t denote the set of third-party states that have a potential claim on i. Our first measure of vulnerability is simply the count of states in K_t. So, for example, when using shared borders as an indicator of potential claims, this variable equals the number of states bordering i (excluding j).

Because vulnerability depends on both the incentives and capabilities of third parties to claim territory, we also construct measures of vulnerability that weight potential claims by the relative power of each potential claimant. In particular, for each state $k \in K_t$, we calculate its capabilities relative to i's as $p_{kit} = \frac{Cap_{kt}}{Cap_{kt}+Cap_{it}}$, where Cap is the COW composite index of capabilities.[45] We then sum the p_{kit} across all states in K_t.

We measure vulnerability to the negative externality from instability in the region as the number of potential claims in a state's neighborhood, where the neighborhood around state i is the set of dyads kl such that both k and l border on i. In principle, the relevant neighborhood might be larger than this, but we suspect that these dyads would have the greatest effect on i's decisions.

42. This means that if TEK emerges after some earlier dispute initiation, such as because a previously excluded group came into power, then the TEK is considered unclaimed unless a new claim arises during the period of time in which this condition exists. In cases where disputes occurred prior to the start of the TEK data (1886 for Europe, 1946 for the rest of the world), we treat the TEK has having been claimed from the outset.

43. See, for example, Escude 1988; Lalonde 2003.

44. Lee 2024.

45. Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972.

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Model Specification

In each model, the key independent variable is a measure of vulnerability to potential territorial claims. This measure captures the *deterrent effect* of potential claims by third parties. But we also control for and estimate the *direct effect* of potential claims on claim initiation: if state *i* has a potential claim on state *j* then *i* should have greater incentive to claim *j*'s territory, independent of the potential claims it must contend with from third parties. There could also be a *reciprocal effect* of potential claims by the target *j* against the challenger *i*. It is not uncommon for states to engage in reciprocal disputes, each claiming part of the other, and we control for the presence of these "reverse" potential claims as well. We also control for the active claims that third parties have already initiated against a challenger state.

All models control for time dynamics arising from the fact that territorial claims tend to arise early in the life of a dyad, often soon after independence, and become much less likely over time. To capture this flexibly, we include a cubic polynomial of the age of the border.[46] All models also control for several variables that have been shown to effect the incidence of territorial claims:

- The challenger's share of dyadic capabilities to capture the direct effects of relative power on claim initiation. For this measure, as with the *p* terms in the weighted measures, we used the COW national capabilities scores.[47]
- The challenger's level of industrialization, proxied by its energy consumption per capita,[48] to capture the argument by Markowitz, Fariss, and McMahon that states with more industrialized economies have fewer incentives to engage in territorial conquest.[49]
- Indicators for regime type based on the Polity and V-Dem data sets.[50] We define a country as democratic if its liberal democracy score is at least 0.5 (on a 0 to 1 scale) as defined by V-Dem; where V-Dem scores are unavailable, we impute them using Polity data. Models include controls for both challenger and target values of each of these variables as well as for whether *both* members of a dyad are democratic.

To facilitate coefficient interpretation, all estimates are obtained using linear probability models and the dependent variable is multiplied by 100, so the effects can be interpreted as percentage point changes in the probability of claim initiation. Models do not include cross-section fixed effects since most variables of interest vary little with time. In all specifications, we use cluster-robust standard errors for dyadic data as proposed in Aronow, Samii, and Assenova.[51]

46. We measure the age of the border—that is, the duration of contiguity—rather than the age of the dyad, since a few states became contiguous after their independence.

47. Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972.

48. Energy consumption and population are derived from the COW National Material Capabilities data set (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972).

49. Markowitz, Fariss, and McMahon 2019.

50. Lindberg et al. 2014.

51. See Aronow, Samii, and Assenova 2015. Clustering was performed using the DCR package for Stata introduced in Carlson, Incerti, and Aronow 2024.

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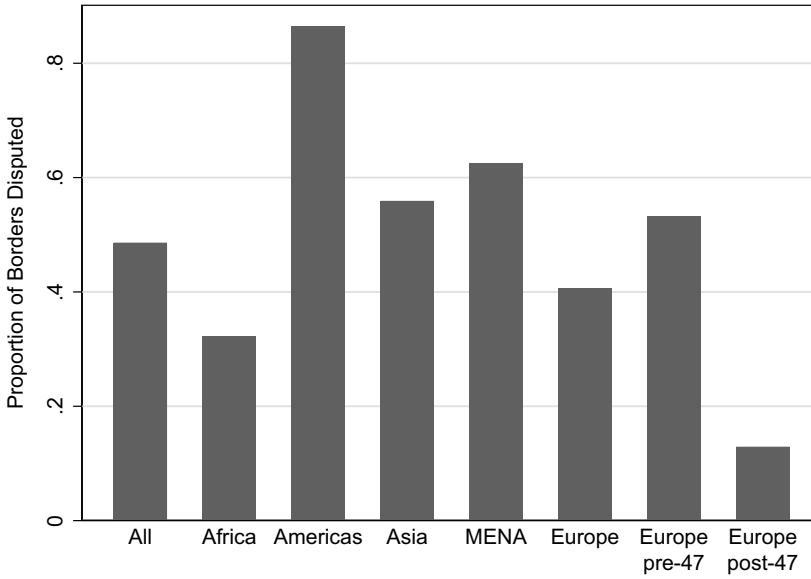


FIGURE 1. *Claim frequency by region*

Results

We present the results at two levels of analysis. First, data aggregated at the regional level allow an initial assessment of whether the regional variation in dispute frequency might be explained by regional variation in our measures of vulnerability. Then, we turn to regression analysis of the directed-dyadic data to determine whether vulnerability to challenges from third parties is associated with a lower likelihood of claim initiation.

Regional patterns. Do regions with more vulnerable states experience fewer claims? Figure 1 documents the variation in the dependent variable, showing the proportion of dyadic borders that were ever disputed in each region.[52] For Europe, we also estimate effects in pre- and post-World War II samples, splitting the time period after the 1947 peace settlement that resolved most outstanding claims from that conflict. African borders are the least likely to have experienced a dispute, consistent with conventional wisdom. Europe also had a low rate of territorial disputes, but this is driven by the very low dispute rate after 1947. At the other end of the scale, the Americas are the most dispute-prone region, with over 80 percent of borders experiencing at least one claim, followed by the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) and then Asia.

52. Dyads are assigned to regions based on the region of the challenger in the directed dyad. Directed dyads involving a few challengers that span regions (for example, Russia, Turkey) are coded according to the location of the target.

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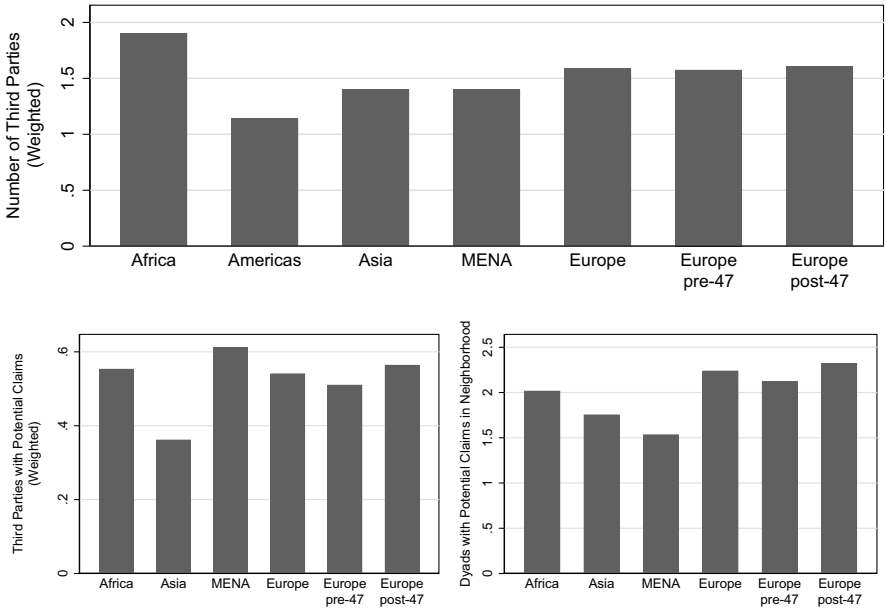


FIGURE 2. *Mean levels of vulnerability by region*

Figure 2 summarizes the mean vulnerability score across directed dyads in each region. We focus on three measures of vulnerability: the number of third-party states, the number of third parties with a potential claim based on TEK or loss, and the number of dyads with a potential claim based on TEK or loss in the challenger's neighborhood. For the first two, we show the counts weighted by relative capabilities.

Comparing these figures reveals some observations that are consistent with the expectation that high vulnerability is associated with low dispute rates, but also some that are not. Africa generally scores high on these measures, consistent with its low rate of territorial revisionism. The Americas have the lowest rate of vulnerability measured by shared borders, consistent with its high rate of disputes. Post-1947 Europe also has high levels of vulnerability, but those levels are essentially unchanged from the pre-1947 period. Thus the marked drop in European dispute rates after the World War II settlement cannot be explained by a change in vulnerability to territorial threats alone. The MENA region, which has the second highest rate of disputes, also scores high in terms of vulnerability to third parties with potential claims.

Directed-dyad level patterns. Figure 3 displays the results of a series of regressions on the directed-dyad data using different indicators of potential claims and different regional subsamples.[53] For each indicator, the figure reports three

53. Appendix C presents tables containing the full regression results. Regional fixed effects are included in tests using the full sample.

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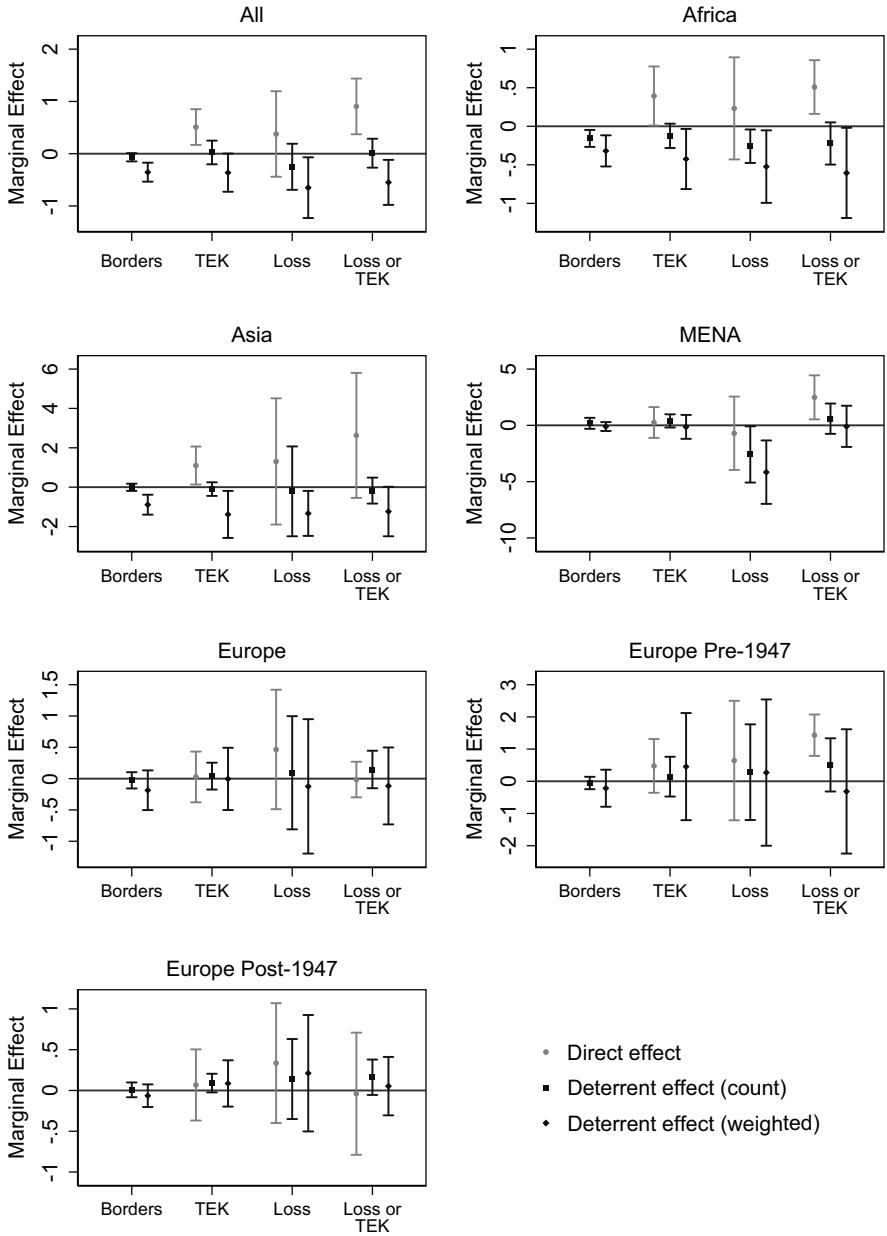


FIGURE 3. *Effect of vulnerability to potential claims on claim initiation*

effects: the direct effect of a potential claim by the challenger against the target (gray circles), the estimated deterrent effect using the raw count of third parties with a potential claim on the challenger (black squares), and the estimated deterrent

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effect using the weighted measure that takes the relative capabilities of third parties into account (black diamonds).[54] If a given indicator is a good predictor of claim initiation, then the coefficient in gray will be positive; if vulnerability to claims by third parties has a deterrent effect, then coefficients shown in black will be negative.

In the full sample, there is evidence consistent with this pattern. The indicators of potential claims all have a positive direct effect, confirming that they are valid predictors of claim risk, and the estimated deterrent effects are generally negative, particularly when using the weighted measures.[55] The evidence that vulnerability deters claims is strongest when using the weighted count of third-party neighbors and the weighted indicator that captures potential third-party claims due to TEK or historical loss.

The figure suggests, however, that the pooled results mask significant regional heterogeneity. The pattern of results is most consistent in the sub-Saharan Africa subsample. Every measure of potential claims has positive direct effects and negative deterrent effects. The estimates suggest that each additional neighbor is associated with a 0.0016 decrease in the probability of a challenge, or around 25 percent of the base rate of claim initiation in the region (0.006). The coefficient on the weighted TEK indicator means that adding a third-party claimant with the same capabilities as the challenger (that is, $p = 0.5$) is associated with a 0.0021 reduction in the probability of a challenge, or one-third of the base rate. These results are robust to the exclusion of any individual African country.

We also see some evidence of deterrent effects in Asia, though neither as strong nor consistent. The indicators of potential claims have positive direct effects, but they are only significantly different from zero at the 10 percent level, and deterrent effects are evident only when using the weighted measures. This latter result is due to China, which, on the basis of raw counts, appears to be highly vulnerable to third-party claims due to its large number of neighbors. Since China initiated disputes against almost all of its neighbors, including it in the sample with the unweighted measure can obscure the average deterrent effect elsewhere in the region. Once we weight potential third-party claims to take into account relative power, however, China appears much less vulnerable. The most robust effect in Asia, in terms of both significance and sensitivity to exclusion of individual countries, is that of shared borders: an additional neighbor with capabilities equal to those of the challenger reduces the predicted probability of a challenge by 0.0045, or about 25 percent the base rate of claim initiations.

54. When using shared borders as an indicator of potential claims, no direct effect is estimated because all challengers in the sample border on their potential targets. Since we run separate models using the weighted and unweighted measures of third-party claims, we technically have two estimates of direct effects for each indicator. Here, we report the coefficients from models using unweighted measures, but the two sets of estimates are virtually identical.

55. The loss indicators have weak direct effects in the multivariate analyses, though the combined TEK-or-loss indicators often strongly predict claims.

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By contrast, there is no evidence of deterrent third-party effects in either MENA or Europe, even in the post-1947 time period that is associated with a stabilization of borders. In MENA, the only indicator of potential claims that consistently predicts actual claims is the combined indicator; however, there is no evidence that vulnerability to third-party claims using this indicator had a deterrent effect.[56]

In Europe, there is no evidence of any deterrent effects associated with vulnerability to third-party claims; if anything, estimated effects of third-party claims are *positive*. This is true even in the post-1947 period, which generally had a low level of territorial conflict. This suggests that the relative stability of this period did not emerge from within-region variation in vulnerability to territorial claims. Instead, the post-1947 results are what would be expected if the region as a whole experienced systemic pressure that muted the effect of local conditions on individual states—that is, pressure from the two superpowers during the Cold War to keep a lid on historic grievances and ethnic tensions.

In Appendix E, we show that vulnerability was not associated with mutual restraint in South America, where territorial claims were driven less by TEK and historical losses than by ambiguities in colonial-era boundaries.

Finally, we ask whether states are deterred from initiating claims by their vulnerability to negative externalities from potential disputes nearby. To do so, we add to the previous models the indicator for the number of potential claims in neighboring dyads, defined as dyads in which both states border on the potential challenger.

Figure 4 reports the estimated effects of potential claims in the neighborhood using the different indicators and regional subsamples.[57] As the figure shows, most models show a positive association between this variable and the probability of a challenge. This effect is largely driven by MENA and pre-1947 Europe.[58] These results cast doubt on the idea that states are deterred from making challenges by the risk of setting off instability among their neighbors.

Collectively, this descriptive evidence presents a puzzle. Despite the intuitive appeal of Pandora's box logic, vulnerability to territorial revisionism has an inconsistent relationship with claim-making behavior both at the regional and directed-dyadic levels. We observe regions where vulnerability was associated with a reduced risk of dispute initiation (Africa and Asia) as well as regions in which widespread vulnerability was associated with widespread conflict (MENA, South America, pre-1947 Europe). And in Europe, we see a major decrease in territorial disputes after World War II despite little change in the (high) levels of vulnerability. What might explain these patterns?

56. There is a negative coefficient on the loss-based indicator, but the absence of a direct effect associated with losses alone casts doubt on whether this is a deterrent effect. In fact, the result is heavily influenced by Saudi Arabia, which made many claims and faced no potential third-party claims based on losses.

57. Full regression results are in Appendix C.

58. We note that none of the results for the MENA region change if dyads including Israel are excluded from the sample.

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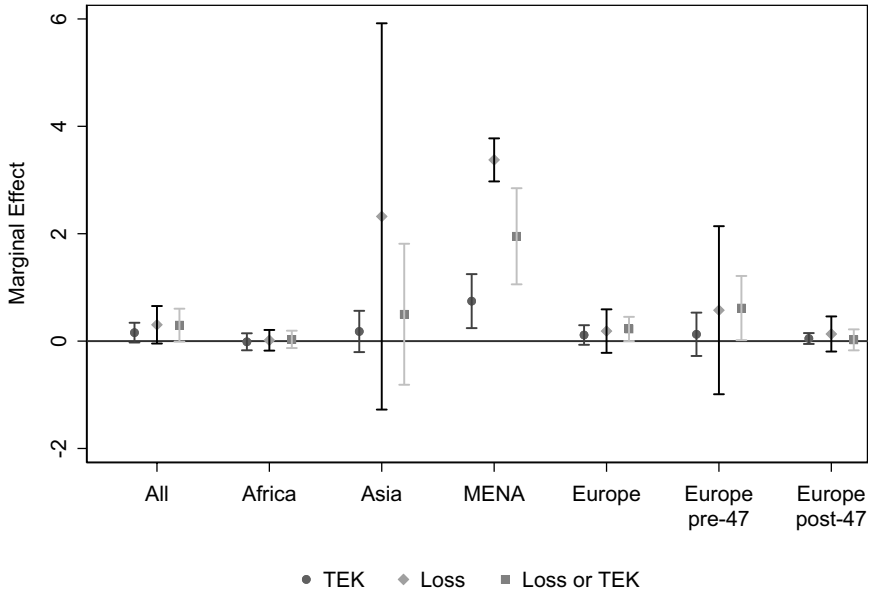


FIGURE 4. *Effect of potential claims in the neighborhood on claim initiation*

A Model of Pandora's Box Logic

In this section, we develop a game-theoretic model that formalizes the logic behind the Pandora's box story in order to help interpret the descriptive findings.[59] The model allows us to identify conditions under which Pandora's box logic could lead to an equilibrium of mutual restraint, as well as conditions under which cooperation can fail.

The model is an *n*-state generalization of the two-state model that is common in formal treatments of interstate bargaining.[60] It shares features with Alesina and Spolaore,[61] which models an interaction in which multiple proto-states co-determine their boundaries and military effort; since borders arise endogenously, there is no status quo around which to coordinate restraint. The present model is most closely related to Krainin and Wiseman,[62] which also presents a dynamic *n*-state bargaining model on a network. In that model, states compete over resources that can be transferred peacefully or won through war. The model has peaceful equilibria, but there are strong tendencies toward general conflict because of the ability to conquer

59. In doing so, we adopt the approach of Clarke and Primo 2012, who argue that models can be used to provide explanations for empirical patterns.
60. See, for example, Fearon 1995; Powell 1999.
61. Alesina and Spolaore 2005.
62. Krainin and Wiseman 2016.

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neighbors and absorb their resources. The model here is more tailored to capture territorial disputes in their spatial context.[63]

We begin by laying out the assumptions and basic intuitions of the two-state version before generalizing to a system of multiple states.

A Two-State Model of Territorial Conflict

A two-state model of territorial conflict begins by depicting the two states' capitals as the endpoints of a line that represents the territory between them. Any point on the line represents a possible border dividing the territory into shares possessed by each state. In particular, for any dyad consisting of states i and j, a border $x_{ij} \in [0, 1]$ divides the territory into shares x_{ij} and $x_{ji} = 1 - x_{ij}$.

Taking inspiration from Caselli, Morelli, and Rohner,[64] we assume that the value of the territory varies along its length as a function of demographic, historical, cultural, or economic endowments at any given location. Formally, let $v_{ij}(x_{ij})$ denote the value that i gets from the territory located between its capital and a border at x_{ij}. We assume that this function is continuous, non-negative, and non-decreasing.[65] Thus each state prefers more territory to less, but the marginal value of additional territory can vary.

The game is infinitely repeated. Let $q_{ij} = 1 - q_{ji}$ denote the status quo border at the start of the game. This is the border the states are "born" with and reflects some unmodeled history that determined the distribution of territory at the dyad's independence. Thereafter, let q_{ijt} denote the distribution of territory at the end of each period $t \geq 1$.

In each period, the states decide simultaneously whether or not to contest their border. For simplicity, we black box the process of a border dispute and assume that its outcome can be described by two sets of parameters. First, let $p_{ij} = 1 - p_{ji}$ denote the division of territory after a dispute. Second, let c_{ij} and c_{ji} denote the expected costs imposed on both states as a result of the dispute. For mathematical convenience, we assume that the costs effectively reduce the value of the territory for all time, rather than being paid one time in the period of the contest.

Although these assumptions resemble those made in bargaining models that treat war as a costly lottery, we adopt a more general interpretation of a "contest" here. The decision to challenge a border causes the game to enter an unmodeled subgame that

63. In a very different context, Anesi and Seidmann 2015 show how legislators bargaining over a multidimensional agenda can arrive at an inefficient allocation because the majority fears that an alternative proposal will shift them into an even worse outcome. In this case, widespread dissatisfaction can remain in equilibrium because overturning the status quo generates unpredictable risks, not because it triggers history dependent punishment strategies, as in the present model.

64. Caselli, Morelli, and Rohner 2015.

65. A natural interpretation of v is that it is the integral from zero to x_{ij} of a function that describes the value at each location. The basic results would not change if we allow v_{ij} to reach some maximum and then decrease, consistent with the idea that states' territorial ambitions can be satiated short of full conquest (see, for example, Schultz and Goemans 2019).

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generates the new border through a variety of possible mechanisms, some peaceful, some not. All we assume is that there are costs, in expectation, associated with territorial disputes, which can include costs of fighting but which may also include costs of military preparation, disruptions in economic relations, diplomatic costs, costs associated with ill-will from the target state, and so on.[66] When states annex neighbors' territory, they must also pay costs associated with governance and with fortification against repossession. Each state effectively has an option in each period to pay this cost to shift the border.

If a border is contested in period t, a new distribution of territory is created at $q_{ijt} = p_{ij}$. Otherwise, the previous status quo is maintained, or $q_{ijt} = q_{ij,t-1}$. The states' payoff at the end of each period equals the value of the territory they possess, that is, $v_{ij}(q_{ijt})$, minus any costs they have incurred from being involved in a contest, either as initiator or target. The states discount future payoffs by a common discount factor $\delta \in [0, 1)$.

Several results follow from these assumptions. First, once the border has been contested, the new status quo will reflect the division that can be obtained via a contest, p_{ij}. That parameter remains constant over time, so there can be no benefit to either state from contesting the border a second time. Thus once contested, the border will remain at p_{ij} forever.[67]

Given this observation, in any period t, the current expected value to state i of contesting its border with j is $\frac{v_{ij}(p_{ij})-c_{ij}}{1-\delta}$. Its current expected value from maintaining the status quo inherited from the previous period is $\frac{v_{ij}(q_{ij,t-1})}{1-\delta}$. Thus state i can profitably contest the status quo border with state j if

$$v_{ij}(p_{ij}) - v_{ij}(q_{ij,t-l}) > c_{ij} \tag{1}$$

—in other words, if the value of additional territory acquired via a contest exceeds the costs. This expression depends on both i's bargaining power, p_{ij}, and the value of the territory that sits on the other side of the status quo border (including, for example, whether it is home to ethnic kin).

Following Powell,[68] we will say that, if condition 1 holds, then state i is "dissatisfied" with its border with j. We can also say that i has a potential challenge on j or that j is a potential target or is vulnerable to a claim. Notice that a necessary

66. See, for example, Abramson and Carter 2016; Schultz 2017; Simmons 2005.

67. To be clear, a contest does not end the game, but $q_{ijt} = p_{ij}$ is an absorbing state from which a dyadic border will not shift. Of course, there might be exogenous shocks that change the parameters over time. We can think of these as resetting the game to a new set of initial conditions. A trickier issue is that relative capabilities might change with the reallocation of territory. Making p_{ij} endogenously time-varying significantly complicates the game, particularly the n-state version, where changes to one state's power can have ripple effects throughout the entire system. Based on related work by Krainin and Wiseman 2016, it is likely that endogenous power shifts make cooperation harder to sustain by increasing the incentives to take territory in order to make future gains. These shifts could, however, induce cooperation to check the power of aggressors (see, for example, Powell 1999, chap. 5). While an interesting possibility, this balance of power logic is distinct from the Pandora's box logic that is our interest here.

68. Powell 1999.

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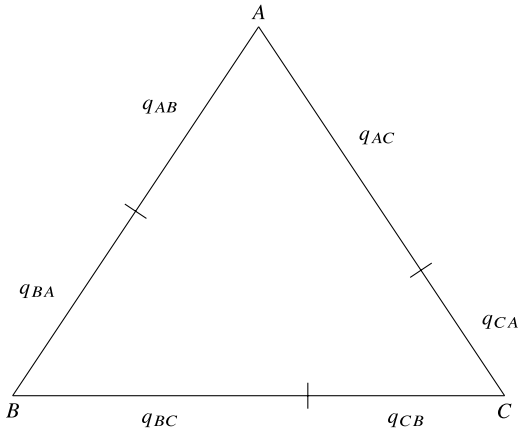


FIGURE 5. *A three-state model of territorial conflict*

condition for i to be dissatisfied with j is that $p_{ij} > q_{ij,t-1}$. Because $p_{ji} = 1 - p_{ij}$ and $q_{ji,t-1} = 1 - q_{ij,t-1}$, it is not possible for both states to be dissatisfied simultaneously.

It follows that, in the two-state version of the game, the unique subgame perfect equilibrium is for a dissatisfied state, if one exists, to contest its border in the first period. Lacking any external factors, there is no basis for restraint. Territorial stability is only possible if neither state is dissatisfied.

The Multistate Model

We now construct a multistate generalization drawing on concepts and notations from graph theory. The system of states is represented by a network whose nodes correspond to the states' capitals. The edges of this network represent the territory between each state that shares a border, whose length we normalize to 1. Formally, let $N = \{1, \ldots, n\}$ denote a set of states with $n > 2$, and let b denote a $n \times n$ matrix of borders such that $b_{ij} = 1$ if states i and j share a border. Let $B_i(N, b) = \{j : b_{ij} = 1\}$ denote the set of states that share a border with state i. A border consists of a division of each edge into territory belonging to each state. As before, assume that, at the outset of each period t, state i's share of its territory with each state $j \in B_i(N, b)$ is given by $q_{ij,t-1}$. This game also inherits the assumptions and notation from the two-state version regarding how territory is valued and how the outcomes of contests are determined.

To build intuition, we will refer at times to the simple network illustrated in Figure 5, which shows three states, A, B, and C, whose capitals are depicted as the vertices of the triangle; the territories between them are edges, with the status quo distributions labeled.

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To capture the pattern of potential claims in the network, let g_t denote, for each period t, an $n \times n$ matrix of borders such that $g_{ijt} = 1$ if state i is dissatisfied with its border with j in period t. Note that while b describes an undirected network (since j borders i if i borders j), the network described by each g_t is directed, since only one state in a dyad can be dissatisfied. Let $C_{it}(N, g_t) = \{j : g_{ijt} = 1\}$ denote the set of neighbors for which state i is a potential challenger in period t, and let $T_{it}(N, g_t) = \{j : g_{jit} = 1\}$ denote the set of neighbors for which state i is a potential target.

As a final preliminary, notice that, in the single-period version of this game, the Nash equilibrium is for every dissatisfied state to press its potential claim(s). Because each such state strictly benefits from making a challenge, there is no incentive to engage in restraint. This means that, in the iterated version of the game, there always exists an equilibrium in which every border that can be profitably challenged is challenged.

As before, territorial stability will arise trivially if no states are dissatisfied. The interesting question is whether stability can also arise as an equilibrium in the presence of one or more dissatisfied states. Notice that, because contests redistribute territory, an equilibrium that preserves the status quo is Pareto optimal. This is true even if the initial endowments are widely regarded as unfair and leave all or most states dissatisfied.[69]

A Pandora's Box Equilibrium

We seek an equilibrium that captures Pandora's box logic: each state refrains from acting on its territorial ambitions for fear that doing so will trigger a cascade of further claims. Formally, this equilibrium takes the following form:

1. In each period t, no state contests its borders as long as no state has contested its borders in a previous period.
2. If at least one state contests its borders in period t, then all dissatisfied states contest their borders in period $t + 1$.

We can think of the equilibrium as instantiating a norm of mutual restraint that is upheld by the expectation that everything unravels if the norm is violated. Much like the "grim trigger" strategy in the repeated Prisoners' Dilemma, the equilibrium strategies include a history-dependent punishment regime that kicks in after the first deviation; however, the punishment entails only one period of mass defection, after which new, stable borders form.

Under what conditions does this equilibrium exist? First, note that behavior off the equilibrium path (2) follows immediately from the fact that every state contesting the borders with which it is dissatisfied is the Nash equilibrium of the single-shot game. Once every state expects restraint to unravel, the expectation is self-fulfilling. Under the assumption that every potential claim will be made, there is no longer any benefit from restraint.

69. See also Rawls 1997, chapter 3.

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On the equilibrium path, the distribution of territory never changes, so $q_{ijt} = q_{ij}$ for all t. Thus for every state i, the current discounted value of not contesting any borders—under the assumption that others will similarly refrain—is

$$EU_i(\sim Challenge) = \frac{1}{1-\delta}\sum_{j\in B_i(N,b)} v_{ij}(q_{ij})$$

What is the payoff from deviating from the equilibrium? Since any challenge by i will trigger all potential claims against it, the most profitable deviation is to make all potential challenges at once. The expected value of this deviation is[70]

$$EU_i(Challenge) = \sum_{j\in C_i(N,g)} \left[v_{ij}(p_{ij}) - c_{ij}\right] + \sum_{j\,\in\, B_i(N,b)\setminus C_i(N,g)} v_{ij}(q_{ij})$$

$$+\frac{\delta}{1-\delta}\left[\sum_{j\in C_i(N,g)\cup T_i(N,g)} \left[v_{ij}(p_{ij}) - c_{ij}\right] + \sum_{\substack{j\,\in\, B_i(N,b)\setminus \\ [C_i(N,g)\,\cup\, T_i(N,g)]}} v_{ij}(q_{ij})\right]$$

The terms outside the brackets capture the value of i's challenges in the current period plus the value of the status quo on borders that i will not challenge. The terms inside the brackets capture the future stream of payoffs starting in the next period, when all of the potential challenges on i are triggered. It follows that state i will not deviate if

$$\delta \geq \delta_i^* = \frac{\sum_{j\in C_i(N,g)}\left[v_{ij}(p_{ij}) - v_{ij}(q_{ij}) - c_{ij}\right]}{\sum_{k\in T_i(N,g)}\left[v_{ik}(q_{ik}) - v_{ik}(p_{ik}) - c_{ik}\right]} \tag{2}$$

This expression has a natural interpretation. The numerator is the sum of all net gains from profitable challenges, and the denominator is the sum of all losses due to challenges by dissatisfied neighbors. The threshold becomes smaller, and thus the condition is easier to meet, the less i expects to gain from revisionism and the more it has to lose from the equilibrium unraveling.

Several results follow directly from this condition. First, expression 2 holds trivially for states that have no profitable challenges, in which case the numerator is 0 (that is, $C_i(N,g) = \emptyset$). Second, the condition cannot be met for states that have potential challenges but are not a potential target, in which case the denominator is 0 (that is, $T_i(N,g) = \emptyset$). It follows that, for any state that is a potential challenger, condition 2 can be met only if it is also vulnerable to a challenge by at least one neighbor. Even then the condition may not hold, and there is no guarantee that the threshold is less than one. If the sum of the potential gains for a state are larger than the sum of its potential losses, then the state has no incentive to engage in restraint.

70. To avoid unnecessary notation, we let $g = g_0$ denote the matrix of potential claims based on the initial distribution of territory.

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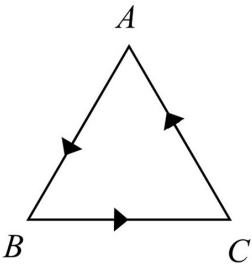


FIGURE 6. *A three-state cycle of potential claims*

Finally, for this equilibrium to hold, it must be the case that condition 2 holds for *every* state in the system, or

$$\delta \geq \max_{i \in N} \left(\delta_i^* \right) \tag{3}$$

Otherwise, at least one state has an incentive to deviate, and the equilibrium cannot be sustained. This condition means that the stability of the system depends on whether the least deterrable state can be deterred by the threat of unraveling. Because states expect a challenge anywhere in the system to lead to universal unraveling, the equilibrium breaks down if *any* state in the system expects to profit from that outcome.

We can illustrate the nature of this equilibrium by revisiting the three-state version. The foregoing logic suggests that the Pandora's box equilibrium can hold only if the set of potential claims is as depicted in Figure 6, where arrows indicate the existence and direction of potential claims. This configuration (and the equivalent one in which the claims run clockwise) is the only one in which all potential challengers are also potential targets. In this system, the Pandora's box equilibrium can hold if all three states satisfy condition 2. One interesting implication is that territorial stability can arise if either none of the states are dissatisfied or all of them are. Starting from the configuration shown in the figure, there would be *more* territorial conflict if there were one or two *fewer* dissatisfied states.

That the stable configuration comprises a cycle of claims is no coincidence. In order for a set of states to all satisfy condition 3, the directed graph (N, g) must contain at least one directed cycle.[71] A cycle is necessary to ensure that every dissatisfied state's behavior is conditioned on the others'. In the system depicted by Figure 6, state A can be deterred from challenging B because that challenge would set off a chain reaction that comes back to haunt it. On the equilibrium path, B's potential

71. The proof is by contradiction. Imagine there is no cycle in the directed graph (N, g). In that case, (N, g) is a directed acyclic graph (DAG). A well-known property of DAGs is that they must have at least one node with no incoming edge. Therefore, if there is no cycle, then at least one potential challenger is not a potential target.

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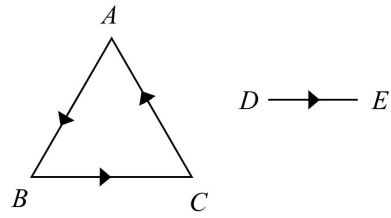


FIGURE 7. *Possible five-state system*

claim on *C* deters a challenge against *A*. A deviation by *A* would unleash *B* to make its claim against *C*, which would in turn have no reason not to contest its border with *A*.[72] By contrast, if *B* did not have a potential claim on *C*, *C* would have an incentive to challenge *A* regardless of *A*'s behavior; as a result, *A* would gain nothing from restraint, and the Pandora's box equilibrium could not hold.[73]

Cross-Regional Variation and "Islands of Stability"

We have thus seen that there exist conditions under which a group of states could coordinate on an equilibrium of mutual restraint. Those conditions are quite restrictive, however, and unlikely to be met as the system grows in size. But if we think of *N* not as the entire global system but as one neighborhood within the larger system, then cross-regional variation becomes possible.

To motivate this idea, consider the five-state configuration in Figure 7. In this configuration, states *A*, *B*, and *C* are all dissatisfied, as in the three-state version earlier, but state *D* has a potential challenge on *E*. As we just saw, the fact that *D* faces no threat to its own territory means the system as a whole cannot sustain a Pandora's box equilibrium, since the failure of the *DE* status quo will cause the rest of the borders to unravel. But it seems plausible that *A*, *B*, and *C* could coordinate on a local equilibrium that would not be disrupted by a challenge elsewhere in the world. Indeed, if conditions 2 and 3 are met for *A*, *B*, and *C*, then there exists an equilibrium in which they make challenges against one another only *in response to a challenge within the triad*. That is, if they collectively expect that a challenge by *D* does not trigger conflict among the rest, then they can maintain stability within the triad based on the norm of mutual restraint.

72. Although it might seem unrealistic that *C* would contest its border with *A* while facing a challenge from *B*, recall that we think of challenges as the onset of a dispute, not the initiation of a war. In our data, 44 percent of disputes are initiated by a state that faces a least one ongoing claim from a third party.

73. As this discussion makes clear, the cyclical structure is needed because *C*'s restraint derives entirely from its potential territorial loss to *B*. One could weaken this requirement by modifying the strict rationality assumptions. As one reviewer suggested, if *C*'s costs internalize a normative prohibition against acquiring territory by force, then a violation by *A* could reduce the perceived costs of making a challenge. Alternatively, one could make an argument based on bounded rationality that "don't make challenges when you are vulnerable to one yourself" is a useful rule of thumb that does not require thinking through how a challenge could ripple through the system, See, for example, Keohane 1984, chapter 7.

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Thus we can partition the entire system into neighborhoods $S = \{N_1, N_2, \ldots, N_m\}$ that contain at least two states and are independent in the sense that none share an edge in common. Then let $M \subseteq S$ denote the set of neighborhoods in which every member satisfies condition 2 in relation to the other members in the neighborhood. The basic insight is that any of the neighborhoods in M could coordinate on the Pandora's box equilibrium and constitute an "island of stability" that is insulated from conflict elsewhere in the system.

If the number of potential islands is large, so too is the number of possible equilibria in the entire system. Individual islands or groups of islands could coordinate on mutual restraint, while others do not. Which of the possible equilibria are selected depends on the expectations that hold within each island. If the states on an island expect conflict with one another, or if they expect that conflict elsewhere in the system will lead to conflict on the island, then those expectations are self-fulfilling. On the other hand, if the states on a given island believe that stability on the island will unravel only in response to a challenge on the island, then local cooperation can be sustained. The variety of possible equilibria could in principle induce significant variation across regions depending on both the existence of potential islands, if any, in those regions as well as beliefs they hold. For example, states in sub-Saharan Africa might still coordinate on a norm of territorial integrity even if states in the Middle East and North Africa contest their borders with one another. Similarly, vulnerable states in West and Central Africa may have coordinated on territorial restraint even as relatively *in*vulnerable states, such as Somalia—which sought neighboring Somali-inhabited areas while its neighbors had little reason to claim Somali territory—bucked restraint elsewhere in the region.

A Top-Down Pandora's Box Equilibrium

Finally, as noted at the outset, territorial stability need not arise from coordination among states in a region, but could also be enforced from above by some powerful state(s). The simplest way to incorporate enforcement into the model is to assume that there exists some external actor, E, that can intervene in territorial contests to protect the status quo. In particular, assume that, in the event some state contests a border, E can choose to intervene at some cost κ to prevent or reverse any gains.[74]

Since enforcement is costly, the enforcer must enjoy some benefit from the status quo. This is particularly likely if E incurs negative externalities from conflict in the system. For example, territorial conflicts might dampen trade, hamper regional integration, create flows of refugees, or introduce instabilities that adversaries might exploit.[75] We can incorporate this consideration by assuming that E incurs some cost due to territorial disputes elsewhere in the system. Let W_E denote an $n \times n$ matrix with elements w_{ij} that denote the cost that state E pays in the event of a dispute involving i

74. Abramson and Carter 2021 provide indirect evidence of great power efforts to stem territorial conflict, showing that new claims are more likely when great powers were embroiled in domestic or international crises.

75. See, for example, Maass 2022.

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and j. Then the total negative externality incurred by E in the event of a breakdown of restraint in any neighborhood m in period t is $\theta_{E,t} = \sum_{i \in N_m} \sum_{j \in N_m} w_{ij} g_{ijt}$. For ease of notation, let θ_E denote the externality based on the initial configuration of potential claims in the system.

We can now sketch a "top-down" Pandora's box equilibrium that takes the following form. Within a generic neighborhood N_m (which could be the entire system):

1. In each period t, no state contests any borders in the neighborhood as long as (a) no borders in N_m were contested in a previous period or (b) every challenger in N_m in a previous period has faced intervention by the enforcer.
2. If some state $i \in N_m$ contests a border in period t, the enforcer intervenes as long as it has never failed to intervene in any previous period. If the enforcer fails to intervene in any period, then it will not intervene in any subsequent challenges in the neighborhood.
3. If at least one state in the neighborhood contests a border in period t and the enforcer fails to intervene, then all dissatisfied states in N_m contest their borders in period $t + 1$.

In this equilibrium, stability depends on the enforcer keeping a lid on Pandora's box by preventing changes to the status quo, and everything unravels if the enforcer fails to act. As before, outcomes can vary depending on expectations about the relevant neighborhood. In principle, this top-down equilibrium could hold in one neighborhood, while the bottom-up version holds in another; if so, failure to intervene in the former does not affect outcomes in the latter.[76]

What conditions must hold for this equilibrium to exist? Intervention induces restraint in dissatisfied challengers by removing any possibility of gaining territory. The main question is whether the threat of intervention is credible. Formally, if a challenge happens in period t, the cost of unraveling in the next period is $\delta\theta_{E,t+1} = \delta\theta_E$.[77] For enforcement to be sequentially rational this term must exceed the cost κ. The key insight is that the benefit from enforcement is increasing in the number of dissatisfied states in the neighborhood, and the weight the enforcer places on the externalities from conflicts that happen there. The worse the consequences of unraveling, the more incentive the enforcer has to take costly action to prevent it.[78]

As in the original Pandora's box equilibrium, stability in this top-down model rests on widespread dissatisfaction. However, in the presence of an enforcer, stability depends on the number and importance of dissatisfied states, not their particular

76. Though beyond the scope of this paper, the possibility that enforcement expectations vary by region raises an interesting point for the literature on reputation, which often focuses on crisis-level (see, for example, Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015) or leader-level (Lupton 2020) factors in determining how past actions affect future expectations. In this game, E could have a different reputation in one region than in another, and the effects of failing to intervene could be isolated to the relevant region.

77. Note that because the intervention preserves the status quo, the configuration of dissatisfied states remains constant, or $g_t = g_0$ for all t.

78. See also Coe and Vaynman 2015.

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configuration. As long as the enforcer is sufficiently motivated, potential challengers that are not themselves potential targets can be deterred. Hence, where this equilibrium holds, the link between restraint and individual vulnerability is severed.

Discussion

How does this theoretical exercise shed light on the patterns in the data? There are several key results that speak to the cross-regional and cross-temporal heterogeneity we observed earlier.

A core insight is that widespread dissatisfaction can create the conditions for an equilibrium of mutual restraint in some areas. Even if every state within an island would benefit from taking some of a neighbor's territory, stability can arise where states are also vulnerable to a challenge if restraint breaks down. Under the right conditions, vulnerability to territorial threats can deter states from upsetting the status quo. We saw some evidence consistent with this link between vulnerability and restraint in data from Africa and, to a lesser extent, Asia.

Widespread dissatisfaction might also permit outside enforcement by actors who worry about conflict in the region. In the case of Europe after 1947, efforts by the United States and Soviet Union to manage conflicts and reduce irredentism in their respective blocs arose from an understanding that potential claims due to historic losses and irredentism could destabilize the region, jeopardizing their alliance blocs and/or risking escalation to general war.[79] The role of external powers in keeping a lid on Pandora's box would explain the pattern observed in post-1947 Europe: high levels of vulnerability by our measures and a low rate of disputes, but no evidence of a dyadic-level deterrent effect of vulnerability in within-region regressions.[80] By contrast, Mares shows that the United State did not play a similar role in Latin America, where territorial conflict was rampant.[81]

At the same time, the model points to at least three ways that Pandora's box logic may fail to materialize:

1. The conditions under which an equilibrium of mutual restraint exists are very restrictive. Even when vulnerability is widespread, restraint depends on whether the least deterrable state within a neighborhood is willing to forego its potential claim(s). Moreover, because there is no guarantee that the thresholds in expression 3 are all less than 1, we cannot appeal to the standard "folk theorem" result that a Pareto-optimal equilibrium is assured for some sufficiently large discount factor. It is not enough that every potential challenger is also a potential target; it must also be the case that every state's potential losses are larger than its potential gains.

79. For discussion of the US role, see, for example, Maass 2022 and Zacher 2001. For a discussion of the USSR's concerns about nationalism in its bloc, see Murashko and Noskova 2001b, 2001a and King 1973.

80. This argument echoes one by McDonald 2015 that hierarchal relationships can influence the estimated correlation between dyadic level traits and outcomes.

81. Mares 2001.

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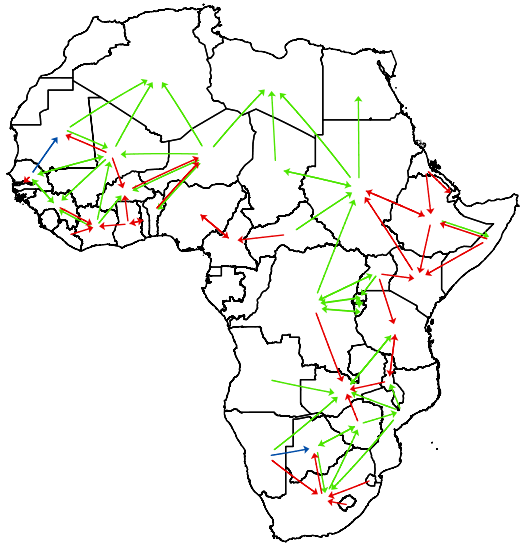


FIGURE 8. *TEK cycles and claims in sub-Saharan Africa*

This condition is likely to be hard to meet in regions that have powerful revisionist states, such as Germany in pre-1945 Europe.

Furthermore, the Pandora's box equilibrium requires a particular configuration of potential claims that contain a cycle. In Appendix F, we explore the effect of such cycles in our data. In particular, we partition the set of third parties with potential claims on the challenger into those that are part of a "potential claim cycle" and those that not. We do so with some caution, however, because our proxies for potential claims are vulnerable to measurement error, which is particularly pernicious in network data.[82] A single false negative, for example, can break a cycle that exists in the real network.

Not surprisingly, cycles are relatively rare. Using the TEK data, just over a quarter of directed dyads had a third-party potential claim that was part of a cycle at some point in its history. This figure varies by region, with MENA (62 percent) and Europe (54 percent) having the highest rates, followed by SSA (26 percent) and Asia (17 percent).[83] Consistent with expectations, there is some evidence that the deterrent effects of vulnerability that we found in Asia and Africa are strongest for challengers embedded in cycles. However, an absence of cycles cannot explain the prevalence of conflict in MENA and pre-1947 Europe, where cycles are quite common.

Figure 8 presents a map showing the cross-sectional distribution of potential claim cycles and claim onsets in SSA. Arrows run from potential challengers to potential targets. A green arrow indicates that the potential challenger was at some point vulnerable to a third-party TEK claim embedded in a potential claim cycle and never

82. For example, Newman 2018.
83. Due to temporal variation, these rates are lower when calculated by directed-dyad year.

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made a claim against the potential target. A red arrow indicates the potential challenger made a claim against the potential target but not at a time when it was vulnerable to a potential claim cycle. A blue arrow indicates that the challenger made a claim against the target while vulnerable to a potential claim cycle.[84]

Consistent with expectations, the vast majority of claims in SSA were not associated with a cycle. The two that were—Senegal-Mauritania (1989–1991) and Namibia-Botswana (1990–1999)—both involved unclear river borders. The states that were most active in making claims, including Somalia, Ghana, and Malawi, were never part of a cycle. At the same time, there are many cases of stability not associated with a cycle (that is, all of the directed pairs with no arrows). If directed dyads in cycles had experienced disputes at the same rate as those not in cycles, we would expect only about three more disputes in the entire region. Thus while cycles of interlocking claims might explain stability in some subregions, they account for only part of the overall story.[85]

2. Even where the necessary conditions exist, mutual restraint is not assured. The Pandora's box equilibrium is never unique; a noncooperative equilibrium, in which each state contests the border with which it is dissatisfied, always exists. Moreover, in a system with multiple potential islands, each island could, in principle, play a different equilibrium, with some coordinating on stability and others not. Therefore, there are factors outside of the game that determine which equilibrium states coordinate on, including the existence, or not, of norms, institutions, and third parties that support convergence on mutual restraint. We might think of a norm of territorial integrity as providing the basis for states to coordinate expectations around mutual restraint, either at the global, regional, or subregional level. In this interpretation, the norm underpins the "common conjecture" that informs players about which equilibrium they are playing.[86]

At the local level, the ability to preserve "islands of stability" requires expectations not only that restraint will hold within an island but also that conflict outside of the island will not cause that restraint to unravel. Sustaining this insulation depends on the existence of identities that distinguish one group of states from others. Returning to Figure 7, whether the *ABC* triad can maintain restraint in the face of a challenge by *D* against *E* depends on expectations about whether these borders are separable or linked. If *D* and *E* are in a different geographic region or have very different histories of border formation, it would be easier to sustain the belief that conflict between them will not spread. On the other hand, if *D* and *E* are close by or if their status quo was established by the same agreement that established the status quo borders between *A*, *B*, and *C*, then the states might expect the fates of these borders to be intertwined. This

84. Directed dyads are classified by the region of the potential challenger, so cycles and claims involving North African challengers are not shown.

85. The absence of territorial claims in the Great Lakes Region (Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda) underscores Atzili's observation that "border fixity" may channel conflict into other forms, such as cross-border support for nonstate armed groups; see Atzili 2012.

86. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between norms and the common conjecture, see Morrow 2014.

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insight suggests a role for regional or subregional institutions in fostering cooperation within subgroups and isolating the subgroup from conflict elsewhere in the system.

This indeterminacy calls into question Herbst's contention that the nature of the problem in Africa was so obvious that little was needed to coordinate African leaders around a stable equilibrium.[87] We have seen that vulnerability to territorial threats does not always lead to restraint. In MENA, for example, vulnerability and dissatisfaction were widespread as haphazard borders split Arab populations. Rather than exercising restraint, Arab leaders engaged in competitive outbidding to establish themselves as standard-bearers of the Arab world.[88] As a result, the region experienced not only claims over the location of boundaries but also larger claims by certain leaders to be the rightful ruler of other Arab states. In Africa, the negotiations that led to the formation of the OAU featured disagreement over whether Pan-Africanism implied cooperation among sovereign states within their inherited borders or stronger political unification that might have erased those borders. Had the latter view prevailed, it could have led to competition for leadership much as Pan-Arabism did in the Middle East. Coordination on the norm of territorial integrity was a political outcome that was not pre-ordained.[89]

3. Pandora's box logic requires a commonly understood status quo. The model assumes that existence of a single cut point, q_{ij0}, defining the border at the start of the game. In some cases, however, the location of the status quo is itself unknown. As we discuss in Appendix E, this problem was particularly pervasive in Latin America, where efforts to follow the principle of *uti possidetis* were bedeviled by the absence of clear lines inherited from colonial rule.

For mutual restraint to work, each state has to be able to recognize actions that constitute a challenge to the status quo, as well as those that do not. Actions such as conducting a census, policing disputes, building a military fortification, or opening a customs house are legitimate to do within one's own border but represent a challenge when done on the territory of another state. In the absence of a clear line, mutual restraint could break down as one state believes that it has followed the rules but the other side believes it has transgressed.[90]

In a situation with multiple contested status quos, states could in principle keep within the confines of what is clearly and indisputably theirs. But that form of restraint would leave ungoverned spaces in the overlapping regions. In terms of the model, gains from peace would be diminished by the fact that some of the available territory would be left on the table. Alternatively, there could be an agreed principle for dividing the overlapping regions that could have served as a focal solution around which to organize restraint. In the context of maritime borders, when states' 200-mile exclusive economic zones overlap, the Law of the Sea establishes the median line as

87. Herbst 1989.
88. See, for example, Barnett and Solingen 2007.
89. See, for example, Nash 2021, chapter 4.
90. The inability to distinguish cooperation from defection has long been understood to be an obstacle to cooperation in the repeated Prisoner's Dilemma; for a recent discussion and contribution, see Herrera and Kydd 2024.

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the status quo border. This focal solution does not eliminate disputes, but it provides an "inside option" for reaching agreements that lessens the need to invoke the "outside option" of conflict.[91] No such provision exists for setting terrestrial borders in the face of an unclear status quo. Without a clear line to coordinate around, mutual restraint is likely to fail.

Conclusion

In this paper, we asked two interrelated questions. Does vulnerability to territorial threats deter states from challenging the status quo? Can widespread vulnerability in a region underpin cooperation around a norm of mutual restraint? Both empirically and theoretically, the answers to these questions are mixed.

We find some evidence that patterns of territorial dissatisfaction affect the propensity for new territorial claims. Particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, states that had many neighbors or which were home to ethnic kin of groups that are politically powerful in their neighbors were less likely to make territorial claims than those that did not face a significant risk of claims by third parties. The results for Africa are consistent with the conventional argument that the precarious condition of Africa's postindependence borders encouraged mutual restraint and the norm of respecting inherited boundaries. The fact that we also find some evidence of this effect in Asia suggests that this dynamic was not isolated to one region.

However, we also saw that the relationship between vulnerability and restraint can fail in several distinct ways. First, regions with widespread dissatisfaction may experience widespread conflict. This was the case in MENA, where the partitioning of Arab populations incentivized outbidding rather than restraint, as well as in Europe up to World War II. It also happened in Latin America, where uncertainty about the status quo borders complicated coordination around mutual restraint. Second, the relationship between vulnerability and restraint is dampened if strong external pressures induce restraint on a region as a whole, weakening any effect of local conditions on behavior, which may explain stability in Europe after World War II. All together, the results suggest that stability based on Pandora's box logic does not come easily.

Data Availability Statement

Replication files for this article may be found at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HUWQQN>.

91. Ásgeirsdóttir and Steinwand 2018.

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Supplementary Material

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Authors

Jamie Hintson is an Academy Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. He can be reached at jhintson@fas.harvard.edu.

Kenneth A. Schultz is William Bennett Munro Professor of Political Science at Stanford University. He can be reached at kschultz@stanford.edu.

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Key Words

Territory; borders; deterrence; Africa; territorial integrity

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