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Contents

Foreword

The Illinois Journal of International Security has always been rooted in a simple but demanding idea that students should be invited to engage seriously with the great security questions of their time. This issue continues that tradition through the work of a cohort of Jeremiah Sullivan Fellows, whose research reflects the intellectual breadth, public purpose, and interdisciplinary spirit that have long defined the Program in Arms Control and Domestic and International Security at the University of Illinois.

ACDIS was founded in 1978 out of a conviction that the problems of war, peace, arms control, and international security could not be understood through any single discipline. From its earliest years, the program brought together scholars in political science, engineering, physics, law, philosophy, history, and area studies to examine the political, technical, ethical, and human dimensions of security. Its founders believed that universities had a responsibility not only to produce knowledge, but also to bring rigorous, nonpartisan scholarship to bear on the most consequential issues of the day. That founding commitment remains central to ACDIS and to this journal.

Jeremiah D. Sullivan embodied that commitment. A Professor of Physics at the University of Illinois, Sullivan served as Director of ACDIS from 1986 to 1994 and later as Head of the Department of Physics from 2000 to 2006. His career joined deep scientific expertise with a lifelong concern for peace and international security. Under his leadership, ACDIS strengthened its national presence by providing technically informed analysis on arms control and disarmament. Sullivan's example is especially important today. He understood that technical knowledge alone is not enough, but that policy judgment without technical grounding is also incomplete. The Jeremiah Sullivan Fellowship honors this legacy by supporting students as they develop their own voices as researchers.

The Fellows examine some of the central security challenges of our time: the colonial and postcolonial roots of borderland violence; public reactions to terrorist attacks across social media platforms; Russia's long-term confrontation strategy and Europe's security vulnerabilities; and the political meaning of apology in the nuclear age. Taken as a whole, this issue reminds us that international security is not an abstract field. It is shaped by borders and memory, by violence and public perception, by state strategy and institutional weakness, and by the moral and political legacies of nuclear weapons. The work published here reflects the best of the ACDIS tradition: interdisciplinary inquiry,

respect for evidence, and a commitment to understanding how scholarship can inform public debate.

Angela Di Fulvio
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The Logic of Borderland Violence: Colonial Borders, Postcolonial Governance, and the Transnational Dynamics of Terrorism and Militancy

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Abstract: Colonial borders are often blamed for postcolonial conflict, yet many highly artificial boundaries remain peaceful while others become enduring corridors of violence. This paper argues that border artificiality does not by itself generate prolonged or transnational conflict. Artificial borders become persistently violent when post-independence states fail to build inclusive, legitimate, and regionally responsive governance in peripheral frontier areas during the foundational first twenty-five years of sovereign rule. The study draws on 29 postcolonial states across Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia. Geocoded conflict data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED, 1997 to 2018) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD, 1970 to 2018) are used to calculate the share of violent events occurring within 110 kilometers of international borders. Border artificiality is measured using the Artificial Borders Index (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011), early regime quality is proxied through 25-year Polity2 averages, and the paper introduces original codings of Early National Governance Failure (ENGF) and Regional Border Governance Failure (RBGF) to capture subnational variation in state-building trajectories. Descriptive spatial analysis confirms that border artificiality alone is not a statistically significant predictor of border-zone conflict across either dataset. Statistical models offer directional but mixed support for the governance mechanism, constrained by multicollinearity and a small sample, and the paper therefore treats these results as exploratory rather than confirmatory. The substantive argument is developed through structured comparative case evidence across four regional archetypes: the Sahel and Sahara, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Horn of Africa. Institutional counterexamples including Botswana, Ghana, Senegal, Singapore, Malaysia, Kuwait, and Tunisia demonstrate that even highly artificial borders remain comparatively stable when early governance is inclusive, bureaucratically present, and regionally cooperative. The findings challenge deterministic accounts of colonial boundary design and redirect analytical attention toward the

quality of post-independence state-building as the primary explanation for contemporary patterns of frontier violence.

Keywords: Colonial Borders, Governance Failure, Borderland Conflict, Transnational Terrorism, Artificial Borders Index, Postcolonial State-Building

1. Introduction

Colonial borders have long been considered one of the most enduring structural legacies of empire. Imposed with little regard for geography, ethnicity, or local sovereignty, these boundaries are frequently blamed for instability across the postcolonial world, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (Herbst 2000; Englebert, Tarango, and Carter 2002; Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011). Yet the empirical record is more uneven than this narrative suggests. Some of the most artificial borders in the world, including those of Botswana, Ghana, and Singapore, have remained remarkably stable over the post-independence period.[1] Conversely, countries with similarly artificial boundaries, including India, Pakistan, Syria, and Niger, have experienced recurring patterns of insurgency, transnational terrorism, and social unrest concentrated along their international frontiers. Ghana, for instance, inherited straight-line colonial boundaries that bisected several ethnic communities, yet it avoided large-scale border-zone violence through early investments in inclusive, centralized governance. This divergence presents a core puzzle for political geography and conflict studies: why do some artificial colonial borders become enduring zones of violence while others remain comparatively stable?

The dominant literature emphasizes the arbitrary nature of colonial frontier-making, which fractured ethnic communities, disrupted local governance structures, and created conditions for grievance-based mobilization (Asiwaju 1985; Mamdani 1996). Structural explanations alone, however, cannot account for the wide variation in conflict outcomes observed across cases with similarly artificial boundaries. This paper argues that artificial borders do not inherently generate prolonged or transnational violence. Such borders become persistently violent when post-independence states fail to build inclusive, legitimate, and regionally responsive governance, particularly in peripheral border regions, during the first twenty-five years of sovereign rule (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Slater 2010).[2]

[1] Throughout this paper, "stability" refers to the absence of sustained militant violence, terrorist activity, or organized social unrest in a country's peripheral border regions. This definition is operationalized using geocoded conflict data from ACLED and the GTD. Stability does not imply complete peace, but rather the absence of chronic or systematic political violence in frontier zones over the post-independence period.

[2] The first twenty-five years after independence represent a formative window for postcolonial states, during which political institutions, elite bargains, and state-society relations are consolidated. Comparative-historical research shows that institutional paths laid down in the immediate post-independence decades have long-lasting effects on subsequent state capacity and regime stability (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Slater 2010). This temporal window captures both founding constitutions and the first two to three generations of

To evaluate this argument, the paper analyzes a dataset of 29 postcolonial states using spatial, statistical, and historical methods. Geocoded conflict data from ACLED and the Global Terrorism Database are used to calculate the share of violent events occurring within 110 kilometers of international borders. Border artificiality is measured using the Artificial Borders Index from Alesina et al. (2011), and early regime quality is proxied by 25-year averages of Polity2 scores. In addition, the paper introduces original codings of Early National Governance Failure and Regional Border Governance Failure to provide a disaggregated assessment of state-building performance across cases.

The quantitative analysis confirms that border artificiality alone does not significantly predict border-zone conflict, a result consistent with both datasets and with the observable stability of high-artificiality counterexample states. Statistical models offer directional but mixed support for the role of regional governance failure, and the paper therefore treats these results as preliminary rather than confirmatory.[3]

The core argument for the governance-activation mechanism is developed through structured comparative case evidence across four regional archetypes. These archetypes trace how colonial boundary inheritance combined with early governance choices to produce sharply divergent frontier outcomes. Institutional counterexamples from Africa and Southeast Asia confirm that the same structural conditions need not produce the same violent outcomes when early state-building is inclusive and administratively present.

This study makes three contributions to existing scholarship. First, it challenges geographic determinism in artificial border theory by demonstrating that post-colonial governance performance, not boundary design alone, better accounts for contemporary patterns of frontier conflict (Englebert, Tarango, and Carter 2002; Roessler 2016). Second, it introduces a temporal dimension to state-building theory by emphasizing the foundational role of the first twenty-five years after independence in shaping long-run institutional trajectories at the frontier (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Slater 2010). Third, it bridges spatial conflict analysis and institutional theory by distinguishing national from subnational governance failure, offering a more precise account of why some border zones become persistent flashpoints for militancy and terrorism while others do not (Buhaug and Rød 2006; Shapiro 2013).

leadership. Beyond this horizon, later instability is better understood as a consequence of earlier institutional legacies rather than as new foundational choices.

[3]The decision to treat the quantitative results as exploratory rather than confirmatory reflects three specific constraints: the small sample size ($N = 26$ after listwise deletion), severe multicollinearity between the RBGF variable and the ABI times RBGF interaction term (condition number $= 1,121$), and the sensitivity of the percentage-based dependent variable to small event-count denominators in several cases. These limitations are discussed in detail in Sections 3 and 5.

2. Background and Motivation

The relationship between colonial boundary-making and postcolonial instability has generated one of the most sustained debates in comparative politics and political geography. The core claim of the geographic determinist tradition is straightforward: straight-line frontiers and the partition of ethnic communities fragment authority, sharpen communal grievances, and lay the structural groundwork for future violence (Asiwaju 1985; Mamdani 1996; Herbst 2000; Englebert, Tarango, and Carter 2002). The Artificial Borders Index formalized this intuition by quantifying how arbitrarily colonial boundaries divided ethnic groups across international frontiers, with higher values indicating greater geometric linearity and ethnolinguistic partition (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011).[4]

Yet the empirical record consistently resists the determinist reading. States with some of the world's most artificial borders, including Botswana, Ghana, and Singapore, have maintained comparative stability across the post-independence period, while states with less geometrically extreme frontiers have experienced sustained insurgency and transnational terrorism. This variation is not random. It points toward conditioning variables that mediate the relationship between colonial boundary design and contemporary conflict outcomes. Where violence actually clusters depends less on the shape of the line than on the quality of governance that grew up around it (Atzili 2012; Herbst 2000).[5]

Institutional scholarship provides the most compelling framework for understanding why. Decisions made in the first decades after independence, about coalition formation, bureaucratic reach, fiscal distribution, and the credible extension of state authority to peripheral communities, shape where governments can project legitimate rule and how citizens experience sovereignty across territory (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Slater 2010).[6] Much of this

[4]The Artificial Borders Index captures two components of colonial boundary arbitrariness: the straightness of frontier segments, measured by the ratio of straight-line to actual border length, and the degree to which borders partition ethnic groups across international lines. Higher index values indicate both greater geometric linearity and more severe ethnolinguistic fragmentation. For the 29 countries in this study, ABI values range from 0.928 to 1.000, a very narrow band that reflects the broadly high artificiality of postcolonial frontiers across Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia.

[5]The border fixity literature, developed most fully by Atzili (2012), argues that the international norm of territorial integrity has paradoxically entrenched weak states by removing the competitive pressures that historically forced states to build administrative capacity. This paper shares Atzili's skepticism of simple geographic determinism but shifts the explanatory focus from the norm of fixity to the quality of governance that postcolonial states actually built within their fixed frontiers.

[6]Englebert (2000) distinguishes between states that derive legitimacy from the correspondence between their legal authority and the social norms of their populations and those that rely on external recognition and resource extraction. Frontier regions are particularly susceptible to legitimacy deficits because colonial administrators typically concentrated infrastructure and political incorporation near capitals, leaving border communities with few material reasons to identify with the postcolonial state.

work evaluates regime quality at the national level. The problem is that frontier crises are produced and resolved locally. Early investments in border administration, service provision, and the incorporation of peripheral elites determine whether the state is experienced as present and legitimate along the outer edges of its claimed territory (Englebert 2000). The twenty-five-year window used in this paper follows the path-dependence arguments developed in comparative-historical institutionalism and targets borderland capacity and inclusion rather than national income alone.

Borders are not merely legal lines; they are opportunity structures. Where state presence is thin and cross-border kinship networks, smuggling economies, and uneven policing create ungoverned corridors, armed groups find the conditions they need to mobilize, finance, and survive (Salehyan 2009; Atzili 2012; Roessler 2016). Organizational research on armed groups shows how they adapt strategically to local governance gaps and exploit external sanctuaries, which shapes both the geography and intensity of attacks (Kalyvas 2006; Shapiro 2013). The implication is direct: when border governance fails, colonial lines become operational seams for rebels and militants; when border governance holds, those same lines function as ordinary administrative boundaries with limited independent effect on conflict.

Geocoded event data make it possible to test where violence actually concentrates rather than simply theorizing about it. Spatial studies consistently show that territorial conflict is more likely in peripheral zones near borders and far from capitals, while contests for control of government cluster near political cores (Buhaug and Gates 2002; Buhaug and Rød 2006). ACLED and the Global Terrorism Database each enable country-level measurement of the share of violent events occurring near borders and allow cross-source replication across distinct event types: political violence and protest on one hand, terrorist incidents on the other (Raleigh et al. 2010; LaFree and Dugan 2007).[7] There is no canonical buffer distance in this literature, so analytical credibility rests on transparency about measurement choices and sensitivity checks across plausible thresholds (Buhaug and Rød 2006; Weidmann 2015).

Regional patterns reinforce the conditional story this paper develops. In the Sahel, long linear frontiers interact with limited administrative reach and cross-border trafficking networks to produce durable belts of border-proximate violence (Roessler 2016; Salehyan 2009). Along the Afghanistan and Pakistan frontier, ethnolinguistic partition and asymmetric policing capacity have sustained sanctuary dynamics and transnational militancy across decades (Salehyan 2009; Atzili 2012). By contrast, Ghana and Botswana, states with highly artificial colonial boundaries, invested early in administrative penetration and inclusive political coalitions and have not exhibited the same chronic concentration of events in the border belt (Herbst 2000; Englebert 2000). These contrasts point con-

[7] ACLED covers political violence and protest events from 1997 onward and is strongest in its coverage of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The GTD covers terrorist incidents from 1970 onward and provides broader temporal depth for the Middle East and Southeast Asian cases. Using both datasets reduces concerns about source-specific biases in event recording and allows cross-validation of the main spatial patterns identified in Section 5.

sistently toward the same conclusion: artificial borders correlate with adverse outcomes primarily when early border governance failed.

Two analytical gaps motivate this paper. First, most existing research does not separate national regime performance from border-region governance during the formative post-independence decades, even though the interaction between colonial lines and state reach is most acute precisely at the frontier (Englebert 2000; Slater 2010). National-level indicators of democracy or state capacity miss the subnational variation that determines whether peripheral communities experience the state as a governing presence or an extractive outsider. Second, empirical tests of the artificial borders hypothesis tend to treat its effect as uniform across cases, despite a theoretical logic that implies strongly conditional effects operating through early state-building at the periphery (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011; Atzili 2012). This paper addresses both gaps by introducing original codings of Early National Governance Failure and Regional Border Governance Failure for the first twenty-five years after independence and by testing, through both preliminary statistical analysis and structured comparative case evidence, whether the relationship between border artificiality and border-zone conflict is conditional on early frontier governance.

3. Concepts, Scope, and Definitions

Artificial borders. Border artificiality is measured using Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski's Artificial Borders Index (ABI), which captures two dimensions of colonial boundary arbitrariness: the straightness of frontier segments and the degree to which borders partition ethnic groups across international lines. Higher values indicate more geometrically linear and ethnolinguistically disruptive demarcation (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011). Across the 29 countries in this study, ABI values range from 0.928 to 1.000, a narrow band that reflects the broadly high artificiality of postcolonial frontiers across Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia.[8]

Border-zone conflict (dependent variable). For each country, the outcome is the share of geocoded events that fall within 110 kilometers of an international border, computed separately for ACLED (political violence and protest) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (terrorist incidents). For each country i and dataset $D \in \{ACLED, GTD\}$, the outcome is the percentage of events within 110 kilometers of an international border:

[8]The narrow ABI range across the sample (0.928 to 1.000, a spread of just 0.072) has important implications for the regression analysis in Section 5. When a continuous predictor varies this little across observations, making it difficult to detect its effect statistically, even if a true effect exists. This is one reason why the paper treats the regression results as exploratory rather than confirmatory and relies on the comparative case evidence in Section 6 to evaluate the conditional hypothesis.

$$\text{BorderShare} = 100 \times \frac{N^{D}_{i,\text{within 110km}}}{N^{D}_{i,\text{all}}} \tag{1}$$

Using percentages emphasizes where violence clusters relative to total national conflict rather than raw event volume, allowing cross-national comparability despite large differences in country size and reporting density (Buhaug and Rød 2006; Raleigh et al. 2010; LaFree and Dugan 2007).[9]

Measurement limitations. The percentage-based outcome variable performs well for countries with large event counts but becomes unreliable when total events are very low. When a country records only a handful of incidents, a single event near or far from a border can swing the percentage dramatically, producing shares that reflect measurement noise rather than meaningful conflict patterns. In this sample, four countries fall below 500 total ACLED events: Botswana records 137 events, Malaysia records 206, Mauritania records 404, and Kuwait records only 10. Their border-zone percentages should be interpreted with significant caution and are flagged in all sensitivity analyses. This limitation is particularly relevant for interpreting the $RBGF = 0$ group in Figure 4, where several institutionally stable counterexample states have inflated percentages precisely because their total event counts are so low. Robustness checks excluding countries below this threshold are reported alongside the main results.[10]

Foundational 25 years. The first twenty-five years after independence are treated as the formative window for state-building. This is the period when rules of political inclusion, administrative reach, and coercive capacity typically crystallize and lock in long-run institutional trajectories (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Slater 2010). National regime quality during this window is summarized using the average Polity2 score across the first twenty-five post-independence years (Polity2_Avg_0_20 in the dataset), which ranges from -10.00 to 6.00 across the sample, reflecting the wide variation in democratic consolidation among postcolonial states dur-

[9] In the master dataset, the dependent variable is stored as border_ACLED_event_pct and border_event_pet_gtd, computed as: ACLED: 100 times border_ACLED_events divided by total_ACLED_events; GTD: 100 times border_events_gtd divided by total_events_gtd. Values are percentages ranging from 0 to 100. ACLED covers political violence and protest events from 1997 onward (Raleigh et al. 2010). The GTD covers terrorist incidents from 1970 onward (LaFree and Dugan 2007). Using both datasets reduces concerns about source-specific biases and allows cross-validation of the main spatial patterns.

[10] The four countries falling below 500 total ACLED events are Botswana (137 events), Malaysia (206 events), Mauritania (404 events), and Kuwait (10 events). When these countries are excluded from the regression analysis, the RBGF coefficient loses statistical significance in both datasets (ACLED $p = 0.890$, GTD $p = 0.781$), and the adjusted R-squared falls to -0.095. This confirms that the main model results are sensitive to small-denominator cases and reinforces why the paper treats the statistical analysis as exploratory and relies on the case evidence in Section 6 for the substantive argument.

ing their foundational decades.[11] Two additional historical codings, described below, distinguish national from border-region performance during the same window.

Governance measures. Two original binary codings capture subnational variation in early state-building trajectories:

Early National Governance Failure (ENGF). A binary indicator coded 1 when, during the foundational window, the state exhibited sustained exclusionary rule and/or repeated extra-constitutional transfers of power that impeded nationwide institutionalization. ENGF captures the degree to which the central government failed to build a legitimate, inclusive political order at the national level. Coding criteria and case-by-case rubric are reported in Appendix A.

Regional Border Governance Failure (RBGF). A binary indicator coded 1 when border regions specifically lacked durable administration and public services, meaningful incorporation of peripheral elites into national political structures, and effective cross-border security coordination including customs enforcement, judicial presence, and joint patrols during the foundational window. RBGF is conceptually distinct from ENGF: a state can achieve national political stability while simultaneously neglecting its frontier zones, as India's experience in Jammu and Kashmir illustrates. RBGF anchors the paper's central conditional argument and its interaction with ABI.[12] Of the 29 countries in the sample, 18 are coded $RBGF = 1$ and 11 are coded $RBGF = 0$.

Scope and periods. The study covers 29 postcolonial states across Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh (as East Pakistan at independence), Botswana, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Iraq, Kuwait, Liberia, Libya, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Somalia, Syria, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Zambia. Event windows are fixed at ACLED 1997 to 2018 and GTD 1970 to 2018. Both series are capped in 2018 to align with Polity V coverage and maintain a consistent cross-dataset panel.[13] Maritime borders and do-

[11] Polity2_Avg_0_20 averages the first 21 post-independence years in Polity (years 0 through 20 inclusive). For countries with staggered recognition or split sovereignties, the averaging window follows the independence date listed in the master dataset. For Bangladesh, the foundational window begins in 1947 as East Pakistan, when the administrative order and border configuration that shaped the CHT governance trajectory were established. Robustness checks starting the Bangladesh window from 1971 yield similar results.

[12] The distinction between ENGF and RBGF is theoretically important and empirically consequential. India exemplifies a state coded ENGF=0 but RBGF=1: its national democratic institutions remained comparatively functional after independence, yet its governance of the Jammu and Kashmir frontier was exclusionary, constitutionally exceptional under Article 370, and ultimately insurgency-producing. This divergence between national and subnational governance trajectories is precisely what motivates keeping the two indicators separate rather than collapsing them into a single governance measure.

[13] The cap at 2018 serves two purposes. First, it aligns with the final year of comprehensive Polity V coverage, ensuring that the governance variables and conflict outcomes are measured over comparable periods. Second, it

mestic administrative lines are excluded. Disputed international borders are retained but flagged in robustness checks.[14]

Measurement choices. The 110-kilometer belt approximates one degree of latitude (approximately 111 kilometers), is wide enough to absorb typical geocoding uncertainty in event data, and corresponds to plausible operational depth for border policing and rebel sanctuary dynamics (Buhaug and Gates 2002; Buhaug and Rød 2006; Weidmann 2015; Salehyan 2009). There is no field-standard distance in this literature. Accordingly, robustness checks vary the spatial band to 50, 80, and 150 kilometers and employ a placebo ring between 110 and 220 kilometers to confirm that the observed patterns are not artifacts of the chosen buffer width. All estimates are replicated in both ACLED and GTD. Figure 1 visualizes the measurement strategy, showing 110-kilometer buffers around international borders with ACLED and GTD events overlaid.

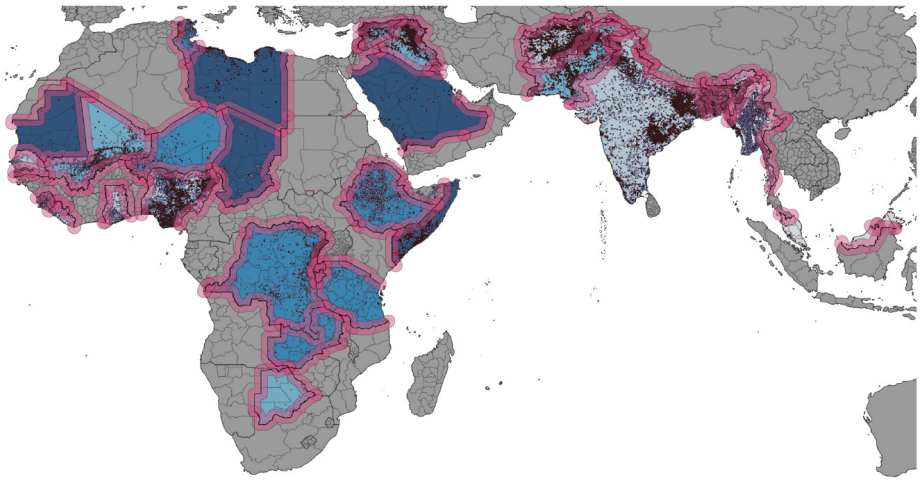

Figure 1: Geographic distribution of geocoded conflict events within 110-kilometer buffer zones around international borders for the 29-country sample. Pink shading indicates the border belt used to calculate conflict shares. Point density reflects the combined distribution of ACLED (1997 to 2018) and GTD (1970 to 2018) events.[15]

avoids the substantial post-2018 shifts in ACLED's geographic coverage expansion, which would introduce inconsistent reporting density across countries if the panel were extended.

[14]The map visualizes the 110-kilometer buffer measurement strategy using the full ACLED and GTD event datasets. Point density reflects both conflict activity and population and reporting coverage. As event density reflects reporting and population as well as conflict, the map is not used for inference. All analyses rely on the country-level percentage outcome defined in the BorderShare formula above.

[15]Event density reflects conflict activity, population distribution, and reporting coverage simultaneously and should not be read as a direct measure of conflict intensity. This map is presented for spatial orientation only. All analyses in this paper use country-level percentage outcomes as defined above.

4. Theory and Expectations

Building on the conceptual and measurement foundations above, this section develops the causal logic connecting colonial border artificiality, early post-independence governance, and the spatial distribution of conflict. The central claim is straightforward: colonial borders do not produce violence on their own. They become violent when early national and regional institutions fail to integrate peripheral societies into the post-independence state. When border governance falters, the same artificial line that divides ethnic groups and disrupts economic networks becomes a logistical corridor for rebellion, militancy, and transnational organized violence (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011; Herbst 2000).

4.1. Mechanism

Colonial borders created potential fracture lines, but post-colonial governance determined whether those lines hardened into zones of conflict or faded into ordinary administrative boundaries. The process unfolds in four steps.

First, structural potential. Artificial lines divide ethnic and economic networks, lowering social cohesion and complicating local governance. The Durand Line, for example, bisected Pashtun kinship and trade systems between Afghanistan and Pakistan, while French and British boundaries fragmented Tuareg grazing routes across Mali and Niger (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011; Herbst 2000). These partitions did not cause conflict by themselves. They created a landscape of latent tension that governance choices would later either defuse or ignite.

Second, national and regional governance mediation. During the first twenty-five years of independence, governments either integrated or marginalized frontier populations through representation, infrastructure investment, and border administration. India's integration of Jammu and Kashmir remained institutionally fragile under Article 370, which produced a semi-sovereign enclave rather than a genuinely incorporated border region. Niger's northern provinces and Mali's Kidal region experienced minimal state presence and investment during the same period, leaving peripheral communities without fiscal, judicial, or security linkages to the capital (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Slater 2010).[16] Early inclusion stabilizes borders. Neglect entrenches fragility.

Third, strategic activation. Where both national and regional governance failed, thin policing, the exclusion of border elites, and the absence of public services created conditions that armed groups

[16] Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) demonstrated that early institutional quality determines long-term governance trajectories, while Slater (2010) showed how early state-elite bargains generate durable differences in coercive and infrastructural capacity across Southeast Asia. Both arguments apply directly to the border integration question: states that struck inclusive bargains in the first post-independence decades extended administrative authority to peripheral zones, while those that relied on exclusionary coalitions left frontiers ungoverned.

could exploit. Cross-border kinship networks and smuggling economies became the infrastructure of insurgency. Libya's Fezzan and the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier exemplify such spaces, where militants and traffickers leveraged porous borders and accumulated local grievances to build sanctuary economies that proved remarkably durable (Salehyan 2009; Roessler 2016; Shapiro 2013).[17]

Fourth, path dependence. Once frontier neglect and informal economies became institutionalized, later reforms rarely reversed them. The self-reinforcing patterns of trafficking, insurgency, and state absence that developed in the Sahel and parts of South Asia during the 1960s through 1980s persist today precisely because early institutional choices locked in trajectories that subsequent governments inherited rather than dismantled (Mahoney and Thelen 2010).[18]

Formally, the causal process can be summarized as:
Border Artificiality (ABI) $\rightarrow$ Fragmentation Potential
Early Regional Governance Failure (RBGF) $\rightarrow$ Integration Failure
Interaction (ABI $\times$ RBGF) $\rightarrow$ Border-Zone Conflict Intensity

4.2. Scope Conditions

The argument applies to postcolonial states whose international borders were externally imposed by colonial powers. It addresses territorial and transnational militant violence rather than urban unrest or electoral conflict, and centers on the first twenty-five years after independence, the window when elite coalitions, bureaucratic reach, and regional state-society relations crystallize (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Slater 2010).[19] Subsequent instability is better understood as a consequence of institutional legacies laid down in these foundational decades rather than as an independent response to contemporaneous shocks.

[17]Salehyan (2009) documented how insurgents exploit weakly governed frontiers to establish cross-border sanctuaries that dramatically increase their survival probability. Roessler (2016) linked exclusionary elite bargains to the coup-civil war trap that characterizes many African states, while Shapiro (2013) analyzed how militant organizations adapt strategically to governance gaps. Together these works illuminate the sanctuary economy dynamic that this paper identifies as the third step in the conflict-activation mechanism.

[18]Mahoney and Thelen (2010) theorized institutional path dependence, demonstrating that once administrative neglect becomes embedded in elite coalitions and informal economies, later reforms rarely dismantle it. This insight is directly observable in Sahelian and South Asian borderlands, where the governance vacuums established in the 1960s and 1970s remain structurally embedded decades later despite repeated international intervention and domestic reform efforts.

[19]The twenty-five year window follows the convention established in comparative-historical institutionalism and colonial origins research. It captures both founding constitutions and the first two to three generations of post-independence leadership, the period during which elite bargains and bureaucratic structures became sufficiently entrenched to shape subsequent trajectories. Beyond this window, instability is better explained as a legacy of earlier institutional choices rather than as new foundational decisions.

4.3. Observable Implications

If the mechanism holds, three patterns should be observable across the sample:

- Highly artificial borders combined with strong national and regional governance, as in Botswana and Senegal, should remain comparatively stable despite carrying ABI scores comparable to the most conflict-affected states in the sample.

- Moderately artificial borders combined with weak regional governance, as in Niger's Agadez region and Nigeria's northern borderlands, should exhibit concentrated frontier violence precisely in the zones where the state never established meaningful administrative presence.

- The combination of high artificiality and regional governance failure, as in Mali-Niger and Afghanistan-Pakistan, should yield the most persistent and geographically concentrated border-zone conflict, as colonial geometry and institutional vacuum compound one another over time.

These expectations echo a broader body of scholarship showing that state capacity and administrative presence, not geometric border design, determine where violence clusters in the postcolonial world (Buhaug and Rød 2006; Englebert 2000; Weidmann 2015).

4.4. Hypotheses

H1 (Artificiality Baseline): Higher border artificiality alone does not significantly increase the share of conflict events near international borders. Artificiality may create structural potential for frontier tension, but it does not independently produce sustained violence absent governance failure (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011).

H2 (Regional Governance Main Effect): States that experienced early regional border governance failure are expected to show higher concentrations of border-zone conflict. This expectation is examined through both preliminary statistical analysis and structured comparative case evidence across four regional archetypes. The case evidence carries the primary argumentative weight given the constraints of the quantitative analysis discussed in Section 5 (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Slater 2010).[20]

[20]The quantitative constraints are threefold. First, the sample size after listwise deletion is $N = 26$ which limits statistical power significantly. Second, ABI varies across only a 0.072 range across the entire sample, making it statistically very difficult to detect its independent effect or its interaction with RBGF. Third, when countries with fewer than 500 total ACLED events are excluded from the regression, the RBGF coefficient loses significance entirely, confirming that the main model result is sensitive to small-denominator cases. These limitations are why the case evidence in Section 6 carries the primary argumentative weight for H2 and H3.

H3 (Conditional Effect): The combination of high border artificiality and early regional governance failure is expected to produce the most persistent and geographically concentrated border-zone conflict. When colonial geometry coincides with institutional vacuum, artificial lines become operational corridors for armed groups rather than ordinary administrative boundaries. This conditional relationship is evaluated through structured comparative case analysis across four regional archetypes in Section 6, where the mechanism is traced through historical evidence rather than assessed through regression alone (Buhaug and Rød 2006; Salehyan 2009; Weidmann 2015).[21]

4.5. Quantitative Expectation and Model Link

To operationalize these expectations, the dependent variable is the percentage of conflict events within 110 km of international borders, measured from ACLED and GTD. Formally:

$$\text{Border Conflict Share}_i^{(D)} = 100 \times \frac{\text{Border Events}_i^{(D)}}{TotalEvents_i^{(D)}} \tag{2}$$

The core model tested in Section 5 is:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(ABI_i) + \beta_2(RBGF_i) + \beta_3(ABI_i \times RBGF_i) + \beta_4(Polity2Avg_i) + \beta_5(ENGF_i) + \epsilon_i \tag{3}$$

where: $D \in \{ACLED, GTD\}$, Y_i = Border Conflict Share (percentage of violent events within 110 km of borders); β_0 = constant term; $\beta_1 \ldots \beta_5$ = regression coefficients estimating the marginal effect of each predictor; ABI_i = Artificial Borders Index (Alesina et al., 2011); $RBGF_i$ = Regional Border Governance Failure (binary or ordinal indicator coded from historical records); $ABI_i \times RBGF_i$ = interaction term capturing the conditional effect of artificiality under governance failure; $Polity2Avg_i$ = average Polity V democracy score during the first 25 years post-independence; $ENGF_i$ = Early National Governance Failure (control for national-level institutional collapse); and

[21] The decision to evaluate H3 through case analysis rather than regression alone is driven by a specific statistical constraint: the interaction term ABI × RBGF is negative in the ACLED model ($\beta = -690.27$) which is the opposite direction from what H3 predicts, and is not significant in the GTD model. This result reflects the severe multicollinearity between RBGF and the interaction term (condition number = $1,121$) rather than a genuine negative relationship between artificiality and conflict under governance failure. The four regional archetypes in Section 6 provide structured qualitative confirmation of H3's conditional logic across independent regional contexts.

ϵ_i = random error term.
The marginal effect of border artificiality is:
Indicating that the influence of artificial borders on conflict intensity depends on regional governance conditions. When regional governance is strong ($RBGF = 0$), β_1 represents the baseline effect; when governance fails ($RBGF = 1$), the effect becomes revealing $\beta_1 + \beta_3$ whether artificiality amplifies conflict only under administrative neglect (Buhaug & Rød, 2006; Weidmann, 2015).[22]

5. Descriptive Evidence: ABI, Governance, and Border-Zone Shares

This section visualizes and tests unconditional patterns between colonial border artificiality and the concentration of conflict near international frontiers. The dependent variable is the percentage of a country's conflict events located within 110 km of an international border, computed separately for ACLED (1997 to 2018) and GTD (1970 to 2018) as defined in 3. Using percentages emphasizes where violence clusters relative to total national conflict rather than how much occurs in absolute terms, allowing cross-national comparability despite large differences in event volumes across the 29-country sample (Buhaug and Rød 2006; Gleditsch and Weidmann 2012; Raleigh et al. 2010; LaFree and Dugan 2007). Each data point represents a state identified by its ISO3 code. Fitted OLS lines with 95 percent confidence bands summarize the bivariate association prior to multivariate modeling.

Figure 2 plots the Artificial Borders Index against the ACLED border-zone share for all 29 countries. The fitted line is shallow and not statistically significant, surrounded by wide confidence intervals that span nearly the full range of the outcome variable. Countries with highly artificial borders appear across the complete spectrum of border-zone conflict intensity, from near-zero to above 50 percent. Somalia (SOM, $ABI = 0.997$) and Singapore (SGP, $ABI = 0.995$) both sit near the top of the artificiality range yet record 12.5 percent and 0.0 percent border-conflict shares respectively. Rwanda (RWA, $ABI = 0.928$), the least artificial border in the sample, records 49.4 percent, higher than most high-artificiality states. Syria (SYR) and Saudi Arabia (SAU) record elevated shares near the ABI ceiling, while Libya (LBY, $ABI = 0.997$) records only 1.8 percent despite one of the highest artificiality scores in the dataset. In West Africa, Nigeria (NGA) shows comparatively

[22]The interaction coefficient β_3 tests the conditional hypothesis H3. A positive and significant β_3 would indicate that border artificiality increases conflict specifically under governance failure, confirming the causal mechanism theorized in Section 4.1. In practice, the estimated β_3 is negative in the ACLED model and not statistically significant in the GTD model, a result that reflects the severe multicollinearity between the interaction term and RBGF (condition number $= 1,121$) and the narrow variance in ABI across the sample ($range = 0.072$) rather than a genuine negative relationship. These constraints mean the regression cannot serve as a confirmatory test of H3, and the paper relies on the structured comparative case evidence in Section 6 for the substantive argument. Full results and interpretation are in Section 5 and Appendix B.

[23]Points are country values. Line is a bivariate OLS fit with 95 percent confidence band. The unconditional slope is shallow and not statistically significant (p = 0.123), indicating that artificiality by itself does not explain where violence clusters.

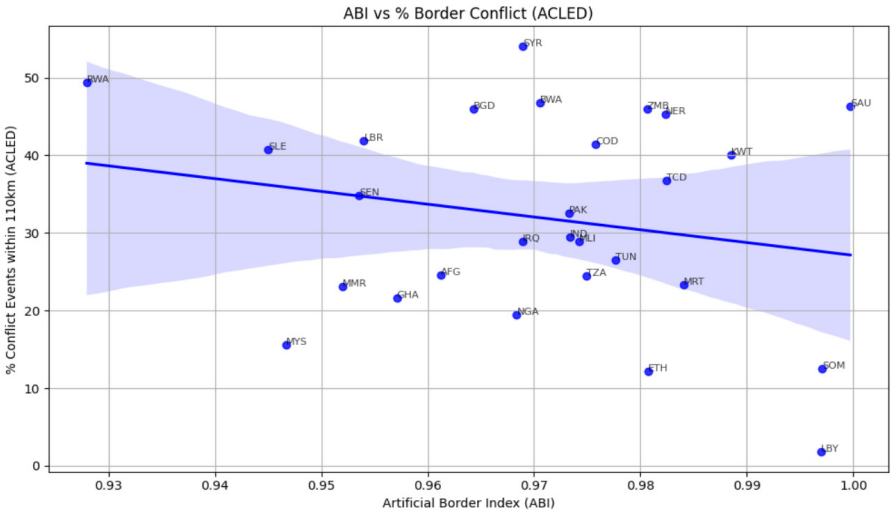

Figure 2: ABI vs. border-zone events (%) in ACLED, 1997-2018.[23]

modest border concentration at 19.5 percent despite high artificiality and well-documented frontier insecurity in its northern zones. The dispersion across all ABI values rules out any simple monotonic relationship between border shape and conflict outcome. Artificial boundaries operate as structural constraints rather than autonomous drivers of instability, their effect conditioned by governance choices that post-colonial states made in the decades after independence (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011; Herbst 2000).

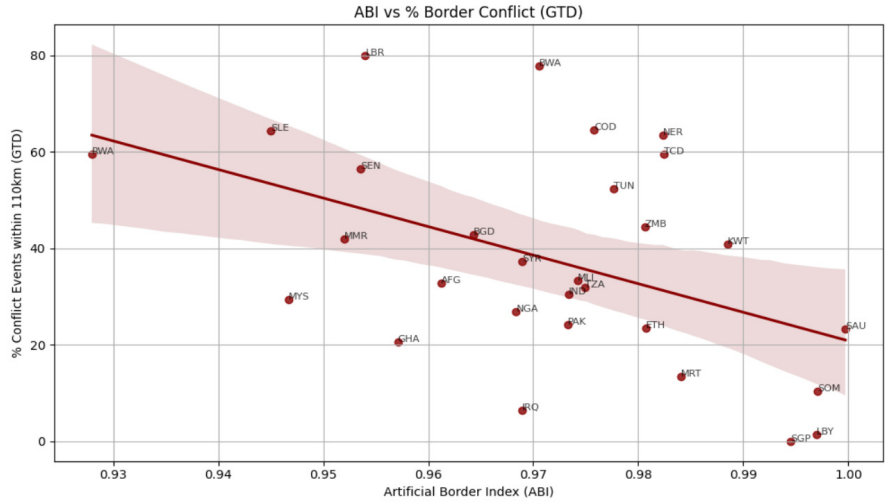

Figure 3: ABI vs. border-zone events (%) in GTD, 1970-2018.[24]

[24]Points are country values. Line is a bivariate OLS fit with 95 percent confidence band.

The GTD scatter reproduces the same fundamental pattern. The bivariate relationship between ABI and border-conflict share is weak, with wide dispersion across cases throughout the full ABI range. Because ACLED and GTD capture distinct event types, political violence and protest on one hand, terrorist incidents on the other, replication across both datasets strengthens confidence that the flat relationship between artificiality alone and border-zone conflict is not a product of source-specific measurement bias (LaFree and Dugan 2007). Frontiers such as Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFG-PAK) and Mali-Niger (MLI-NER) conform to the expectation that porous borders facilitate militant movement, yet equally artificial boundaries like Botswana-Namibia (BWA-NAM) and Senegal-Mali (SEN-MLI) remain largely peaceful. These contrasts reinforce the conclusion that state capacity and early administrative consolidation, not geometric boundary design, explain frontier security outcomes (Salehyan 2009; Atzili 2012).

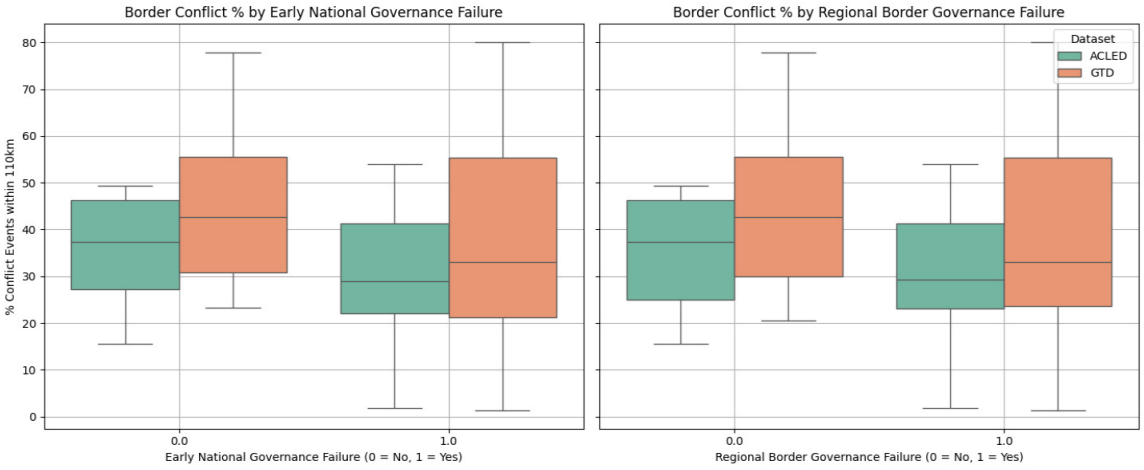

Figure 4: Border-zone events (%) by RBGF = 0/1., ACLED and GTD.[25]

Figure 4 disaggregates border-zone conflict shares by Regional Border Governance Failure status. The distributions reveal a more complex and honest picture than a simple governance-failure-equals-more-conflict story. In the ACLED data, the median border-conflict share is actually slightly lower for $RBGF = 1$ countries (29.2 percent) than for $RBGF = 0$ countries (34.8 percent), and the same pattern holds in the GTD data (33.1 percent versus 40.8 percent). This counterintuitive result is partly a measurement artifact: several $RBGF = 0$ counterexample states, including Botswana (137 total ACLED events) and Kuwait (10 total ACLED events), have very small total event counts that inflate their percentage shares, as discussed in Section 3. A country with 10 recorded events of which 4 fall near a border records a 40 percent share that carries almost no statistical meaning.

[25]Figure 4 presents side-by-side box plots for RBGF=0 and RBGF=1 groups across both ACLED and GTD datasets. Each box shows the interquartile range with a line at the median. Whiskers extend to 1.5 times the IQR. Points beyond the whiskers are individual country outliers.

What the distributions do show clearly is substantially greater variance within the $RBGF = 1$ group. The GTD interquartile range for $RBGF = 1$ countries (31.8 percentage points) is wider than for $RBGF = 0$ countries (28.1 percentage points), and the $RBGF = 1$ distributions produce more extended upper whiskers in both datasets, with several cases recording border-conflict shares above 45 percent. This pattern is consistent with the paper's core argument: governance failure does not uniformly elevate border conflict across all cases, but it creates the conditions under which conflict can become heavily concentrated in frontier zones when other activating factors are present. The case evidence in Section 6 traces precisely when and why this concentration occurs.[26]

Taken together, Figures 2 through 4 point consistently away from geographic determinism and toward a conditional logic. Artificial boundaries are distributed almost uniformly across the full range of conflict outcomes, ruling out any direct mechanical relationship between colonial border design and contemporary frontier violence. The governance failure variable produces greater variance rather than uniformly higher medians, suggesting that its effect is conditional rather than universal. These descriptive patterns motivate the more detailed causal analysis developed through the regional case archetypes in Section 6.

Exploratory OLS regression results for both datasets are reported in Appendix B. Given the small sample size ($N = 26$), the severe multicollinearity between RBGF and the interaction term (condition number = 1,121), and the measurement limitations of the percentage-based dependent variable detailed in Section 3, these results are treated as preliminary pattern identification only and should not be read as confirmatory tests of the hypotheses.[27] The models confirm that border artificiality alone (ABI) is not a statistically significant predictor of border-zone conflict in either dataset, consistent with H1 and the visual evidence in Figures 2 and 3. Regional Border Governance Failure produces a positive and significant coefficient in the ACLED model ($\beta = 672.22$, $p = 0.034$), offering directional support for H2, though this result does not reach conventional significance in the GTD model ($\beta = 704.22$, $p = 0.12$). The interaction term ABI $\times$ RBGF is negative in the ACLED model and not significant in the GTD model, which is the opposite direction from H3's prediction and reflects the severe multicollinearity and narrow ABI variance documented in Section 3. Neither

[26]The within-RBGF=1 variance is itself theoretically informative. Not all governance-failure states produce the same level of border-zone conflict, which is consistent with H3's conditional logic: governance failure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for high frontier violence. The severity of border-zone conflict within the governance-failure group appears to depend on additional factors including the degree of ABI, the presence of cross-border sanctuary networks, and the depth of peripheral exclusion, all of which are examined through the case evidence in Section 6.

[27]The regression results in Appendix B show that ABI alone is not significant in either model (consistent with H1), that RBGF produces a positive and significant coefficient in the ACLED model ($\beta = 672.22$, $p = 0.034$) but not in the GTD model ($\beta = 704.22$, $p = 0.12$), and that the interaction term ABI $\times$ RBGF is negative in the ACLED model ($\beta = -690.27$, $p = 0.035$) and not significant in the GTD model, which is the opposite direction from what H3 predicts. Neither Polity2 average nor ENGF reaches conventional significance thresholds in either model. The adjusted R-squared values of 0.12 (ACLED) and 0.17 (GTD) indicate that the models explain limited variance once sample size penalties are applied, reinforcing the exploratory interpretation.

Polity2 average nor ENGF reaches significance in either model. The substantive argument for H2 and H3 is carried by the comparative case evidence in Section 6.[28]

Section 6 examines how the interaction between colonial border artificiality and early governance failure manifests across four distinct regional archetypes: the Sahel and Sahara, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Horn of Africa. Each archetype represents a different historical configuration of ABI, RBGF, and ENGF values drawn directly from the Final Master Dataset, linking colonial inheritance to contemporary patterns of frontier violence. A fifth set of institutional counterexamples drawn from sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia closes the analysis by demonstrating that the same structural conditions need not produce the same outcomes when early governance is inclusive and administratively present.

6. Case Evidence: Frontier Violence, Artificiality, and Governance in Practice

While prior sections established a general statistical and visual correlation between artificial borders, governance failures, and border-proximate conflict, this section develops the causal mechanism through a set of illustrative country case studies. These examples are organized not by geography alone but by conflict archetype, reflecting how different postcolonial legacies interact with the Artificial Borders Index (ABI) and the Regional Border Governance Failure (RBGF) metric. Each case first reconstructs the colonial inheritance, post-independence administrative trajectory, and contemporary violence profile, then analytically connects these to its ABI and RBGF scores. This strategy avoids generic regional clustering in favor of typological clarity: high-artificiality but well-governed states are contrasted with structurally similar frontier zones where governance failed, offering empirical depth to the conditional logic that the descriptive evidence in Section 5 could only gesture toward. QGIS border belt maps precede each archetype to foreground the spatial clustering of violence near international boundaries.

[28]The full regression results are in Appendix B. ABI: ACLED $\beta = 83.87$ ($SE = 211.21$, not significant), GTD $\beta = -189.91$ ($SE = 325.02$, not significant). RBGF: ACLED $\beta = 672.22$ ($SE = 295.61$, $p = 0.034$), GTD $\beta = 704.22$ ($SE = 454.89$, $p = 0.12$). ABI $\times$ RBGF: ACLED $\beta = -690.27$ ($SE = 305.03$, $p = 0.035$) GTD $\beta = -724.14$ ($SE = 469.40$, $p = 0.12$). Polity2 average and ENGF not significant in either model. R-squared = 0.30 (ACLED), 0.33 (GTD). Adjusted R-squared = 0.12 (ACLED), 0.17 (GTD). $N = 26$ in both models.

[29]Border-zone conflict events within 110-kilometer buffer zones, Sahel-Sahara region. Pink shading indicates the border belt. Point density reflects ACLED and GTD event distributions for Mali, Niger, Chad, and Libya. This map is presented for spatial orientation. All analyses use country-level percentage outcomes as defined in 3.

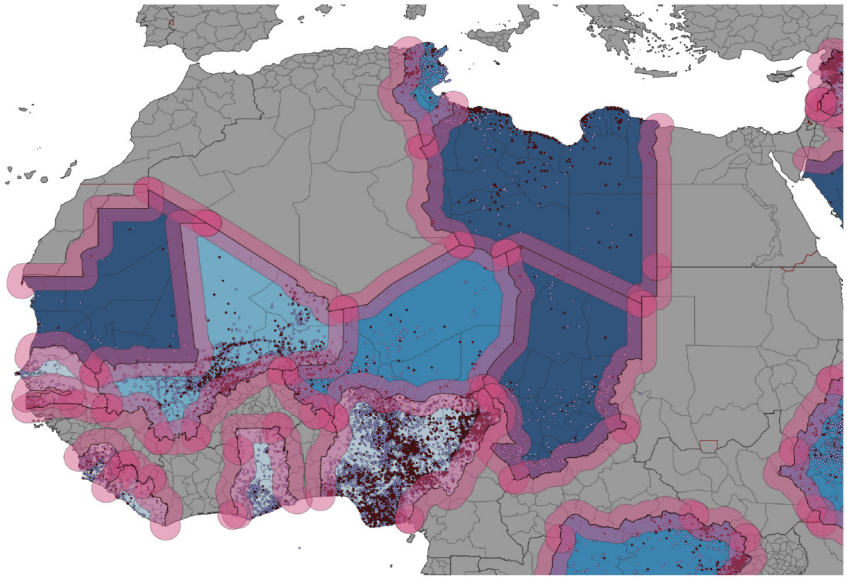

Figure 5: Border-zone events Sahel-Sahara.[29]

6.1. Sahel-Sahara Archetype: High Artificiality Weak Governance

The Sahel-Sahara belt spanning Mali, Niger, Chad, and Libya represents the clearest expression of the paper's central argument: that colonial artificiality becomes conflict-producing only when early frontier governance fails. According to the Final Master Dataset, these four states share exceptionally high Artificial Borders Index scores ranging from 0.974 to 0.997, uniformly exhibit Regional Border Governance Failure ($RBGF = 1$) and Early National Governance Failure ($ENGF = 1$), and recorded deeply negative average Polity2 scores during their foundational decades, with Mali at -7.0, Chad at -6.3, Niger at -4.3, and Libya at -7.0.[30] The concentration of conflict events near borders is striking across three of the four cases: Niger records 45.2 percent of all ACLED events within 110 kilometers of its borders, Chad records 36.8 percent, and Mali records 28.9 percent. Libya records only 1.8 percent in ACLED, these figures illustrate the geographic distribution of its exceptionally high total event volume of 16,529 ACLED events concentrated in interior urban zones rather than any genuine border stability. The geometric borders imposed by European partition created latent fault lines, but the failure of post-independence governance in the 1960s through 1980s transformed those lines into enduring conflict corridors (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski 2011; Herbst 2000).

[30] Average Polity2 scores are drawn from the Polity V dataset covering the first twenty-five post-independence years for each state (Polity V Project 2018). Mali: -7.0, Chad: -6.3, Niger: -4.3, Libya: -7.0. The range across these four states reflects variation in the depth of authoritarian consolidation during the foundational window, with Niger somewhat less uniformly negative than the others, though all four fall well below the democratic threshold and all four experienced multiple unconstitutional transfers of power during this period.

6.1.1. Colonial Partition and the Structural Legacy (1884-1960)

Between 1884 and 1906, French and British surveyors demarcated the central Saharan frontiers using geometric convenience straight latitudinal and longitudinal lines that bisected pastoral, linguistic, and trade networks with no regard for the communities living across them (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski, 2011; Herbst, 2000). The Mali-Niger, Niger-Chad, and Libya-Chad borders severed Tuareg, Toubou, and Kanuri confederations that had for centuries traversed the desert's trans-Saharan caravan routes. Colonial rationality in this region meant linear clarity for European diplomacy, not administrative viability for the populations divided by those lines. When decolonization arrived Libya in 1951, Chad and Niger in 1960, Mali in 1960 - each new state inherited borders that separated closely related communities while binding together diverse and spatially fragmented populations under a single flag. French administrators had ruled indirectly through native authorities, leaving almost no bureaucratic penetration into the desert interior. On the eve of independence, these states lacked the fiscal capacity, administrative infrastructure, and military reach to govern their vast frontiers. The colonial lines supplied the geometry of fragmentation. The absence of frontier administration ensured that artificiality would remain politically consequential for decades.

6.1.2. Post-Independence Governance and Frontier Exclusion (1960-1985)

The early post-independence decades marked a decisive and irreversible institutional divergence between capital-centered regimes and their neglected borderlands. In Mali, President Modibo Keita (1960-1968) attempted socialist centralization but provoked rebellion among the Tuareg in Kidal and Gao through the Alfellaga revolt of 1963-1964, which his government suppressed with overwhelming force.[31] His successor Moussa Traore (1968-1991) governed through military patronage while maintaining minimal state presence in the north, consolidating the conditions for the far more devastating insurgencies that would follow (Roessler, 2016).

In Niger, President Hamani Diori (1960-1974) concentrated political and economic power in Niamey and the southern Zarma-Hausa belt, leaving the Tuareg and Toubou peripheries impoverished and politically isolated. His overthrow by Seyni Kountche in 1974 deepened military dominance without extending administrative reach. The northern departments remained effectively ungoverned throughout this foundational period, a choice that would prove catastrophic when drought, structural adjustment, and cross-border weapons flows collided in the 1990s.

Chad was born divided. Independence in 1960 under Francois Tombalbaye produced an exclusion-

[31]The Alfellaga rebellion of 1963-1964 involved armed Tuareg attacks on Malian military posts in the Adrar des Ifoghas. Its brutal suppression by the Malian army established a pattern of coercive frontier response that fueled subsequent insurgency cycles in 1990, 2006, and 2012. The 2012 rebellion led directly to the French military intervention Operation Serval and the ongoing international presence that defines the Sahelian security landscape today.

ary regime favoring the Christian-Sara south, which triggered the Front de Liberation Nationale du Tchad insurgency in 1966, marking the beginning of decades of civil conflict between northern Muslim communities and southern political elites (Englebert, Tarango, and Carter, 2002). The rise of Hissene Habre in 1982 militarized the state without integrating the frontier, adding external coercive capacity on top of a governance vacuum that remained structurally intact.

Libya, independent in 1951 and transformed by Muammar Gaddafi's 1969 coup, became simultaneously a domestic autocracy and a regional destabilizer. Tripoli financed Tuareg and Toubou insurgents across Mali, Niger, and Chad during the 1970s and 1980s, framing them as anti-imperialist movements while suppressing its own frontier populations and recruiting unemployed Sahelian fighters into the Islamic Legion (Small Arms Survey, 2014). Across all four states, frontier governance during the foundational window remained either absent or coercive, the conditions captured precisely by the dataset's uniform $RBGF = 1$ coding.

6.1.3. Conflict Clustering and the 110-km Border Belt (1990-2020)

Spatial conflict data reinforce the historical narrative at every turn. Between 1997 and 2018, more than one-quarter of all recorded violent events in Mali, Niger, and Chad occurred within 110 kilometers of international borders, with Niger reaching 45.2 percent. ACLED identifies a sharp post-2012 escalation as the pivotal turning point, when the northern Mali Tuareg rebellion led by the Mouvement National de Liberation de l'Azawad and jihadist factions including Ansar Dine and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara transformed the Gao-Kidal-Menaka tri-border zone into the epicenter of Sahelian insurgency (ACLED, 2025). The borders did not become dangerous in 2012. They had been abandoned by the state since 1960-2012 was simply when that abandonment became globally visible.

In Niger, militant flows radiate outward from the Lake Chad basin and the Agadez corridor, where Boko Haram and ISGS exploit the sparse security coverage that decades of frontier neglect made structurally inevitable. Chad continues to experience cross-border incursions at a scale that reaches the very apex of state power columns of the Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad advanced from southern Libya in April 2021, killing President Idriss Deby in combat on the frontline (International Crisis Group, 2021). Libya's post-2011 collapse transformed the Fezzan region into the primary logistical hub of Sahelian militant activity and weapons trafficking, connecting the Mediterranean arms market to insurgencies as far south as northern Nigeria (Lacher, 2020). These developments confirm the paper's foundational claim: artificial colonial lines remain operationally dangerous where governance vacuums persist.

6.1.4. Mechanism Synthesis

The Sahel-Sahara archetype validates the conditional logic developed in Section 4. High artificiality (ABI 0.974 to 0.997) combined with early governance failure ($RBGF = 1$, $ENGF = 1$) produced high and persistent border-zone conflict across three of the four cases, with Libya's low percentage

explained by event distribution rather than genuine stability.[32] Frontier neglect produced chronic legitimacy deficits that enabled armed groups to mobilize along boundaries that once merely divided pastoral confederations. The Sahel's colonial geometry became operational geography, its linear demarcations transformed across six decades into corridors of insurgency and trafficking that no subsequent government has managed to dismantle. This is path dependence in its most visible form (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010).

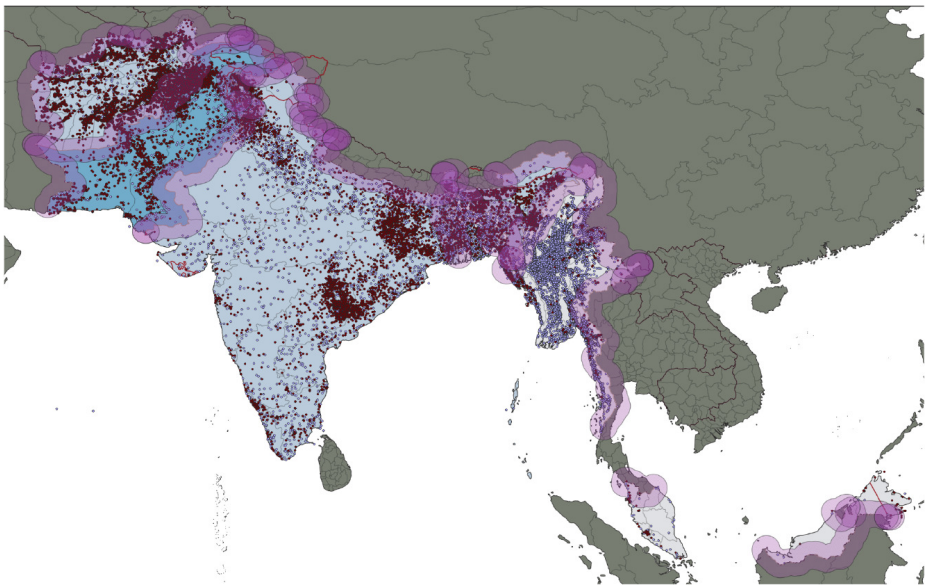

Figure 6: Border-zone events South Asia.[33]

6.2. South Asia Archetype: Partition Borders, Special Status, and Divergent Frontier Governance

South Asia India (independence 1947), Pakistan (1947), Afghanistan (1919), and Bangladesh (1947 as East Pakistan, 1971 as a sovereign state), forms a second empirical archetype in which colonial partitions and constitutional special statuses embedded conflict potential that subsequently hinged entirely on how each state chose to govern its borderlands. All four exhibit high ABI values: India

[32] Libya's low ACLED border-event percentage of 1.8 percent should not be misread as evidence of frontier stability. Libya's total ACLED event count is concentrated in interior urban zones including Tripoli and Benghazi rather than in the southern Fezzan desert. The Fezzan's porous borders with Niger, Chad, and Sudan function as the primary smuggling and weapons transit routes for the entire Sahelian militant ecosystem, a role extensively documented in qualitative reporting even when it does not register prominently in geocoded event data.

[33] Border-zone conflict events within 110-kilometer buffer zones, South Asia. Point density reflects ACLED and GTD events within the border belt for India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. Pink shading indicates the 110-kilometer buffer zone.

0.9733, Pakistan 0.9733, Afghanistan 0.9612, and Bangladesh 0.9643. All four are coded $RBGF = 1$ in the Final Master Dataset. Only India avoids full national governance collapse, coded $ENGF = 0$, reflecting its comparatively stable democratic institutions at the national level, a Polity2 average of 5.2 across the foundational window. Pakistan scores 1.2, Afghanistan -6.5, and Bangladesh -4.5, reflecting the varying degrees of national institutional fragility across the archetype.[34]

Conflict clustering within the 110-kilometer belt is substantial and consistent: Bangladesh records 46.0 percent of ACLED events in the border zone, Pakistan 32.5 percent, India 29.5 percent, and Afghanistan 24.5 percent, mirrored closely by GTD proportions of 42.8 percent, 24.1 percent, 30.5 percent, and 32.7 percent respectively. Afghanistan's low ACLED percentage of 24.5 percent should be read alongside its total event volume of 124,504 ACLED events, even at 24.5 percent, that represents over 30,000 conflict events concentrated near borders, more in absolute terms than the entire event records of most other countries in the sample. These figures confirm that borderland violence in South Asia is not the residue of colonial geometry alone. It is the outcome of post-independence frontier governance choices that left peripheral communities excluded, unrepresented, and ultimately insurgent.

6.2.1. Partition and Colonial Boundary Inheritance (1893-1947)

Two British cartographic acts produced South Asia's most enduring territorial fractures. The Durand Line of 1893 divided Afghanistan from British India across 2,640 kilometers of mountain and desert, bisecting the Pashtun, Waziri, and Baloch peoples through the Khyber, Kurram, and Gomal passes. Its near-straight alignment ignored the kinship and trade networks linking Khost, Paktia, and Waziristan across what would become an international boundary, and it was never ratified by the Afghan government, a legal ambiguity that institutionalized contestation on both sides of the line from the first day of independence (Salehyan, 2009). Half a century later, the Radcliffe Line of 1947 cut Punjab and Bengal into chaotic mosaics of religious identity and economic life, displacing more than 14 million people and killing nearly one million in the violence that accompanied Partition (Talbot and Singh, 2009). These partitions created structural potential for fragmentation. Only where successor states failed to extend legitimate governance did that potential become organized, persistent violence.

[34]India's Polity2 average of 5.2 places it in positive territory comparatively democratic making its ENGF=0 coding consistent with its national institutional record. Pakistan's score of 1.2 reflects oscillation between civilian and military rule without full democratic consolidation. Afghanistan's -6.5 reflects deep authoritarian instability before the Soviet-era collapse. Bangladesh's -4.5 reflects the military-dominated politics of the post-1975 period following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination. The South Asian archetype thus includes the full range of national governance trajectories, from comparatively democratic to deeply authoritarian, yet all four share RBGF=1 codings and substantial border-zone conflict shares, reinforcing that it is subnational frontier governance rather than national regime type that drives the outcome.

6.2.2. Early Governance Trajectories (1947-1985)

India: From Constitutional Autonomy to Frontier Insurgency

India's integration of Jammu and Kashmir embodied both constitutional idealism and frontier failure simultaneously. Under the Instrument of Accession of 1947, Delhi controlled defense, foreign affairs, and communications, while Article 370 (1949) and Article 35A (1954) endowed the state with its own constitution, flag, and residency-based property laws. The intention was to preserve plural federalism within a diverse union. The effect was to create a semi-sovereign enclave in which the legitimacy of central authority remained permanently contested and Delhi's commitment to genuine inclusion was perpetually in question. New Delhi's dismissal of elected Kashmiri governments in 1953 and 1986, its manipulation of state elections in 1987, and its repeated suspension of the assembly under Article 356 fragmented local legitimacy across successive generations (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, 2001).[35]

When mass protests erupted in 1989, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front and Hizbul Mujahideen converted those accumulated grievances into armed insurgency. Pakistan-based groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed institutionalized cross-border militancy through training camps in Muzaffarabad and Kotli, transforming the Line of Control into a persistent low-intensity battlefield that has never fully quieted since. Even the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, a dramatic constitutional intervention intended to normalize governance, left the region as India's most heavily militarized space, its insurgency geographically confined but politically unresolved (Human Rights Watch, 2020; The Guardian, 2024). The dataset records $ENGF = 0$, $RBGF = 1$, $ABI = 0.9733$ and a border-event share of 29.5 percent in ACLED and 30.5 percent in GTD. These figures capture the central contradiction perfectly: a strong central state nationally, a governance vacuum locally.

Pakistan (Independence 1947): State by Militarization, Frontier by Neglect

Pakistan's western periphery represents one of the most sustained and deliberate cases of frontier neglect in the postcolonial world. The Frontier Crimes Regulation of 1901, retained in full after independence, left Waziristan, Khyber, Bajaur, and Kurram under indirect rule through tribal elders and Political Agents with no representative institutions, no property rights, and no regular policing. This legal architecture kept the poverty rate in ex-FATA above 70 percent by the turn of the millennium while insulating the region entirely from civilian governance. Islamabad treated the frontier not as a citizen space to be administered but as a strategic buffer to be managed

[35]The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 removed Kashmir's special constitutional status and reorganized it into two union territories under direct central administration. The Indian government argued this would normalize governance and accelerate development. Human rights organizations documented a significant crackdown on civil liberties in the aftermath, and the region remains India's most heavily militarized space (Human Rights Watch 2020; The Guardian 2024).

at arm's length. During the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence transformed Peshawar and Quetta into rear bases for Afghan Mujahideen, flooding the tribal belt with weapons, fighters, and radical networks in a strategy that prioritized geopolitical leverage over frontier security (Salehyan, 2009).

After 2001, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) consolidated control of South Waziristan, exploiting the governance vacuum that Islamabad had deliberately maintained for five decades. Military operations- Rah-e-Rast in 2009 and Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, temporarily displaced fighters but also displaced three million civilians, further eroding whatever legitimacy the state had retained in these communities.

The governance vacuum in Balochistan produced a parallel insurgency equally rooted in the same pattern of deliberate exclusion. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which emerged as a significant armed force in the early 2000s, draws its organizational logic directly from Islamabad's decades-long refusal to extend meaningful fiscal, political, or administrative inclusion to Balochistan's frontier communities (International Crisis Group, 2024). Unlike the TTP, which operates primarily along the Afghan border, the BLA targets the economic infrastructure of the state itself, pipelines, Chinese workers on CPEC projects, and Pakistani security forces across the Baloch-Afghan-Iranian tri-border zone. Its persistence is not a recent phenomenon. It is the accumulated consequence of communities that experienced the Pakistani state primarily as a coercive and extractive presence rather than a governing one. Even the 25th Amendment of 2018, which merged FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, delivered administrative restructuring without meaningful resource transfer. The dataset records $ENGF = 1$, $RBGF = 1$, $ABI = 0.9733$, and a border-event share of 32.5 percent in ACLED and 24.1 percent in GTD. Pakistan's frontier remains its deadliest zone.

Afghanistan (Independence 1919): The Unratified Line and the Perpetual War Economy

Afghanistan's post-1919 independence produced a state that never fully internalized the Durand Line as a legitimate international boundary. Never ratified by any Afghan government, the line cut through the homelands of the Pashtun Ghilzai and Durrani tribes, dividing kin networks across Khost, Paktia, Paktika, and Nangarhar in ways that made the border functionally invisible to the communities it supposedly separated. King Amanullah's modernization attempts (1919-1929) faltered amid tribal revolts, inaugurating a century-long oscillation between centralization and fragmentation that no Afghan government has resolved.

The Soviet invasion of 1979 and subsequent civil war remilitarized the border completely. Tora Bora, Spin Boldak, and the Helmand desert became supply corridors for Mujahideen and later Taliban logistics. Following the 2001 US intervention, NATO's inability to secure the Kunar and Nuristan highlands allowed the insurgency to regenerate continuously across each fighting season. The Taliban's return in August 2021 reignited cross-border tensions at Spin Boldak and Torkham, while

TTP camps reportedly operated from Kunar and Laghman, drawing Pakistani military fire across a border that Kabul has never formally recognized (International Crisis Group, 2024; Washington Post, 2025). The dataset records $ENGF = 1$, $RBGF = 1$, $ABI = 0.9612$, and a border-event share of 24.5 percent in ACLED and 32.7 percent in GTD, with 124,504 total ACLED events making those percentages represent enormous absolute concentrations of frontier violence.

Bangladesh (1947 as East Pakistan; 1971 Independence): Militarized Inclusion and Conditional Peace

Bangladesh offers the paper's most direct and analytically cleanest test of the governance-activation mechanism. The Chittagong Hill Tracts, forested uplands of Rangamati, Bandarban, and Khagrachari adjoining Myanmar and India, had been sites of sustained insurgency since Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Under British rule, the CHT Manual of 1900 had limited Bengali settlement and recognized indigenous chiefs. After 1947, East Pakistan revoked these protections, promoting Bengali settlement and military control that deepened further after 1971. By the 1980s, the Shanti Bahini, the armed wing of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti, controlled hill-tract corridors and cross-border routes into Mizoram and Chin State. The army's Operation Dabanol in 1984 scorched villages and displaced over 60,000 refugees into India (Peace Accords Matrix, 2024).

The CHT Peace Accord of December 1997 promised local self-government and partial troop withdrawal. Implementation has remained incomplete, land disputes persist and army camps continue to operate, but the partial devolution of governance authority to frontier communities was sufficient to reduce insurgent violence sharply (UN Peacemaker, 2024). Here is the critical analytical point: the borders did not change after 1997. The ABI did not change. What changed was the partial extension of institutional inclusion to peripheral communities, and conflict declined as a direct consequence. This is the cleanest test of H2 in the entire dataset, a within-case quasi-experiment in which governance is the only variable that moves. The dataset records $ENGF = 1$, $RBGF = 1$ transitioning toward 0 after 1997, $ABI = 0.9643$, and a border-event share of 46.0 percent in ACLED and 42.8 percent in GTD.

6.2.3. Mechanism Synthesis and Implications

South Asia replicates the African mechanism but substitutes partition and constitutional exceptionalism for geometric colonial demarcation. Where frontiers were treated as temporary compromises, strategic buffers, or inconvenient legacies to be managed rather than governed, Kashmir's autonomy, FATA's indirect rule, the Durand Line's denial, the CHT's conditional autonomy, border-zone violence became chronic and self-reinforcing. Where frontier communities were gradually incorporated, as in Bangladesh after 1997, violence receded despite persistent artificiality. The pattern across all four states confirms the conditional logic of H3: high ABI combined with $RBGF = 1$ consistently produces border-event shares between 24.5 and 46.0 percent, while governance improvement reduces that concentration even within a single case over time.

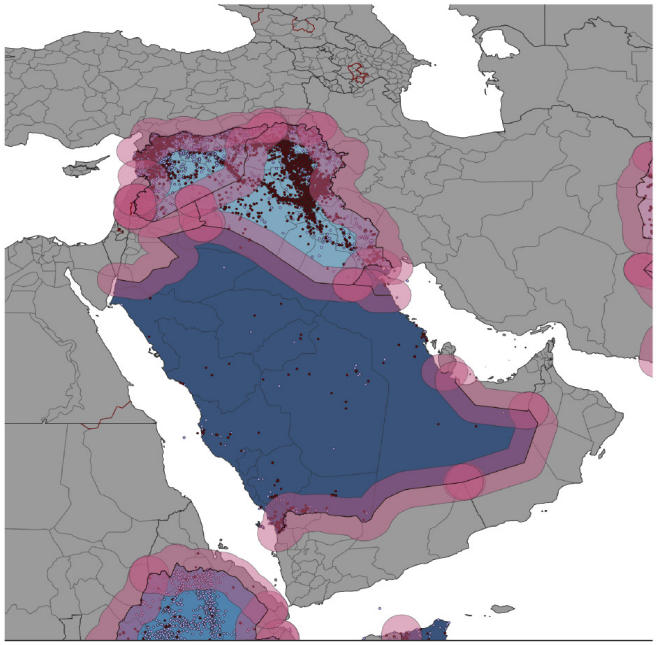

Figure 7: Border-zone events Iran-Syria and Kuwait.[36]

6.3. Middle East Archetype: Consolidation and Collapse (Iran and Syria)

The Middle East archetype examines how externally imposed boundaries and postcolonial state-building interacted with borderland governance under conditions of persistent geopolitical pressure. Syria and Iran reveal that even strong, centralizing regimes cannot permanently insulate artificial boundaries from the consequences of regional governance failure. Their experiences show that early governance choices shape not only immediate post-independence stability but long-run vulnerability to the kind of regional spillover that eventually draws even administratively capable states into sustained frontier conflict.

6.3.1. Colonial Legacies and Structural Potential (1916-1946)

The modern boundaries of both Syria and Iran were products of imperial cartography. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 divided Ottoman provinces into British and French spheres that ignored existing tribal, ethnic, and sectarian linkages across today's Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey (Gelvin, 2011; Owen, 2004). French mandate administrators from 1920 to 1946 further fragmented Syrian

[36]Border-zone conflict events within 110-kilometer buffer zones, Middle East. Point density reflects ACLED and GTD events within the border belt for Syria and surrounding states. Pink shading indicates the 110-kilometer buffer zone.

territory into semi-autonomous regions, drawing administrative lines that split Kurdish and Bedouin networks across the Euphrates and Jazira. Iran's boundaries were older but no less externally shaped: throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British and Russian commissions defined its borders in geometric segments that bisected tribal territories in Baluchistan and Kurdistan (Ansari, 2012).

Syria's ABI in the Final Master Dataset is 0.9689, reflecting high boundary artificiality fully consistent with the broader sample. Iran is not included in the 29-country quantitative dataset due to data availability constraints, but its governance trajectory is included here as a qualitative regional comparison given its centrality to Middle Eastern frontier dynamics.[37]

6.3.2. Early Governance Trajectories (1946-1979)

Syria. After independence in 1946, Syria entered two decades of instability marked by coups in 1949, 1954, and 1961. The Baathist seizure of power in 1963 centralized authority under an Alawite military elite. This created a highly centralized but exclusionary state. The northern and eastern provinces, including Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor, remained politically and economically marginalized. Infrastructure and education spending in these areas remained below the national average (Hinnebusch, 2001). By the 1970s, Hafiz al-Assad's regime maintained coercive control but relied on military and intelligence networks rather than inclusive institutions. In the dataset this period corresponds to Early National Governance Failure ($ENGF = 1$) and Regional Border Governance Failure ($RBGF = 1$).

Iran. Under Reza Shah (1925-1941) and later Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979), Iran pursued centralized state-building through bureaucratic extension, disarmament of tribes, and infrastructure projects connecting frontier provinces to Tehran (Cronin, 2007). Despite strong administrative reach, inclusion remained limited. Kurdish and Baluchi regions were tightly monitored, and periodic revolts were suppressed rather than resolved politically. In the dataset, Iran's early regime registers moderate institutional strength nationally ($ENGF = 0$) but persistent regional strain ($RBGF = 1$). This pattern foreshadowed later volatility as cross-border militancy expanded after 2003.

[37] Iran was excluded from the 29-country dataset due to limitations in geocoded conflict event coverage consistent with the data availability requirements applied uniformly across the sample. Iran's ABI from Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski (2011) is approximately 0.82, somewhat lower than Syria's 0.9689, reflecting its partially natural mountain and river boundary segments. All qualitative discussion of Iran in this section draws on historical scholarship rather than dataset values and should not be read as referencing quantitative codings from the Final Master Dataset.

6.3.3. Border Conflict and Regional Spillovers (1980-2020)

Syria's 2011 uprising began in Daraa near the Jordanian border and spread rapidly to Idlib, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zor along the Turkish and Iraqi frontiers. The Final Master Dataset records 54.0 percent of Syria's ACLED events within 110 kilometers of international borders the highest border-conflict share in the entire sample and 37.3 percent of GTD incidents in the same belt. With 192,045 total ACLED events, Syria's 54.0 percent figure represents over 103,000 individual conflict events concentrated near its frontiers, a figure of extraordinary magnitude. The Islamic State's operational corridor from Raqqa to Mosul between 2014 and 2017 exemplified how weak frontier governance converts colonial geometry into modern sanctuary zones, with the Syrian-Iraqi border functioning as an open theater of militant logistics and territorial conquest (Lister, 2016; Weidmann, 2015).

Iran's borders, relatively contained through the mid-2000s, became increasingly porous after the collapse of Iraqi state control in 2003 and the emergence of the Islamic State across the Syria-Iraq frontier after 2014. Baluchi insurgents of Jaish al-Adl and Kurdish factions including Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) exploited mountainous terrain in Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan for cross-border raids. Iranian-backed militias including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force simultaneously projected power across Iraqi and Syrian territory, further blurring the line between border defense and regional intervention (Phillips, 2020). The result is a frontier that is not stable but militarized and fluid, demonstrating that even states with historically strong bureaucratic reach cannot fully contain the transnational effects of regional governance collapse next door.

6.3.4. Mechanism Synthesis

The Middle East archetype confirms the conditional logic of this study while adding an important qualification: governance failure can be produced by state collapse as well as by original neglect. Syria's coercive centralization without institutional inclusion produced the chronic regional marginalization that made its border provinces catastrophically vulnerable after 2011. The dataset metrics for Syria - $ABI = 0.9689$, $ENGF = 1$, $RBGF = 1$, border-event share 54.0 percent in ACLED, 37.3 percent in GTD, represent the strongest quantitative confirmation in the sample of what H3 predicts: high artificiality combined with frontier governance failure produces the most intense concentration of border-zone violence. Iran's trajectory shows that even strong states cannot insulate themselves from the frontier consequences of regional governance breakdown once it reaches the scale seen after 2003.

[38] Border-zone conflict events within 110-kilometer buffer zones, Horn of Africa. Point density reflects ACLED and GTD events within the border belt for Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Pink shading indicates the 110-kilometer buffer zone.

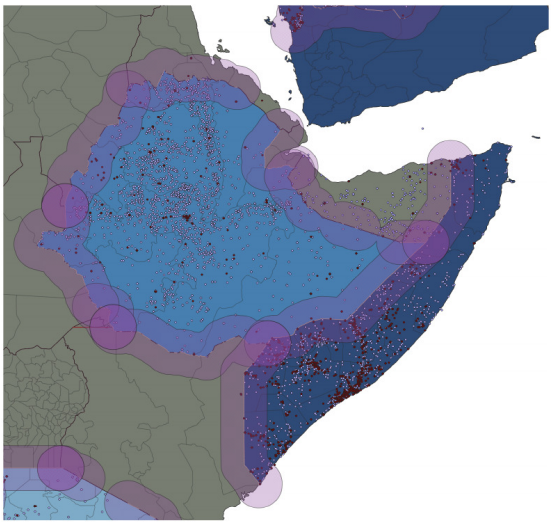

Figure 8: Border-zone events Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia.[38]

6.4. Horn of Africa Archetype: Fragmented Legitimacy and the Boundary of Collapse

While the Middle East demonstrated how even strong states can be drawn into frontier instability once regional governance collapses, the Horn of Africa represents the most extreme version of the paper's causal logic. Here, artificial boundaries, fragile post-independence institutions, and deeply uneven regional governance combined to produce one of the most volatile border systems in the world. Somalia and Ethiopia, the two Horn states in the Final Master Dataset, exemplify how early administrative fragmentation and peripheral exclusion transform colonial lines into what are effectively borders of state collapse.

6.4.1. Colonial Legacies and Structural Potential

The modern Horn was carved from late-nineteenth-century imperial rivalries between Britain, Italy, and France. The Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1897 and the Franco-Ethiopian Agreement of the same year drew straight borders across Somali-inhabited territories, dividing kinship groups between Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, and Djibouti in ways that created permanent irredentist grievances across the entire region (Touval, 1972). Italy's creation of Italian Somaliland and Britain's control of the north further entrenched artificiality by institutionalizing clan divisions into separate administrative zones, making the eventual 1960 merger of two different colonial administrations into a single Somali Republic a foundational governance challenge that the new state was never equipped to solve.

Somalia's ABI in the Final Master Dataset is 0.9971, the highest in the entire sample, and Ethiopia's is 0.9807, placing both among the most artificially bordered states in the world. Eritrea is not included in the quantitative dataset due to data availability constraints, but its historical trajectory, a thirty-year independence war concluded in 1991, immediate post-independence border conflict with

Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000, and persistent frontier militarization under President Isaias Afwerki, is qualitatively consistent with ENGF=1 and RBGF=1 codings based on the same historical criteria applied to other cases.[39]

6.4.2. Early Governance Trajectories (1950s-1980s)

Somalia's independence in 1960 merged British and Italian territories without a unified administrative framework, bureaucratic language, or coherent security apparatus. The 1969 coup by Siad Barre replaced civilian politics with an authoritarian regime that favored certain clans while militarizing governance across the rest of the territory. The disastrous Ogaden War of 1977-1978 against Ethiopia exhausted the army, devastated the national economy, and permanently delegitimized the state in the eyes of the communities that had been mobilized and then abandoned (Lefebvre, 1991). By the 1980s, uprisings in both the north and south signaled administrative breakdown that was total rather than partial. The dataset records Somalia as $ENGF = 1$, $RBGF = 1$, $ABI = 0.9971$.

Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie (1941-1974) expanded administration into border regions including the Ogaden and Eritrea but relied on imperial patronage rather than inclusive institutional integration. The Derg military junta (1974-1991) pursued forced collectivization and centralization from Addis Ababa, fueling armed resistance in Eritrea, Tigray, and Oromia simultaneously (Markakis, 2011). Despite modernization efforts in some sectors, the absence of federal accommodation produced chronic frontier rebellion at a scale that eventually destroyed the regime itself. The dataset records Ethiopia as $ENGF = 1$, $RBGF = 1$, $ABI = 0.9807$.

6.4.3. Border Conflict and Regional Spillovers (1990-2020)

After the fall of Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia fragmented into competing warlord territories that internationalized the country's conflict across all of its borders simultaneously. Al-Shabaab, emerging in 2006, exploited governance vacuums to operate seamlessly across Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia, demonstrating precisely how post-colonial state collapse converts colonial border geometry into militant operational infrastructure (Menkhaus, 2007). The Final Master Dataset records Somalia's ACLED border-event share at 12.5 percent and GTD at 10.3 percent. These percentages must be read alongside Somalia's extraordinary total event volume of 78,274 ACLED events. At 12.5 percent, that represents approximately 9,784 individual conflict events concentrated near Somalia's international boundaries with Kenya and Ethiopia, a figure that in absolute terms exceeds the total

[39]Eritrea was excluded from the 29-country dataset due to data availability constraints. Its thirty-year independence war(1961-1991), immediate border conflict with Ethiopia (1998-2000) that killed approximately 70,000 people (Abbink, 2003),and subsequent indefinite military conscription under an internationally isolated authoritarian regime are all consistent with ENGF=1 and RBGF=1 characterizations. These are analytical characterizations based on historical evidence, not quantitative dataset codings.

ACLED event records of most other countries in the sample. [40] Somalia's conflict is not absent from its frontiers. It is distributed across the entire territory at such devastating scale that even massive frontier violence constitutes a modest share of the national total.

Ethiopia's ACLED border-event share is 12.1 percent and GTD is 23.4 percent, with a total of 19,541 ACLED events. As with Somalia, these percentages should be read alongside absolute event volumes. The Ogaden corridor, the Ethiopia-Eritrea borderlands, and the Benishangul-Gumuz frontier zone all experienced recurring violence across this period. The Ethiopia-Eritrea border war of 1998-2000 killed approximately 70,000 people and displaced over one million (Abbink, 2003). Even after the 2018 peace agreement and Abiy Ahmed's Nobel Prize-winning rapprochement with Eritrea, cross-border raids, refugee flows, and the Tigray conflict that erupted in 2020 continued to demonstrate the fragility of frontier governance in the Horn.

6.4.4. Mechanism Synthesis

The Horn archetype illustrates the most complete expression of the paper's causal logic. Colonial cartography divided ethnic constituencies across multiple state boundaries. Post-colonial regimes failed to build inclusive administrative systems capable of managing those divisions at the frontier. Early national governance failure meant institutions never achieved legitimacy beyond the capital, while border governance failure meant local loyalties and cross-border identities remained stronger than state authority. The combination of $RBGF = 1$, $ENGF = 1$ and ABI above 0.98 in both Horn cases is consistent with H3's conditional logic even where the percentage-based outcome variable is compressed by very high total event volumes. What the Horn adds to the argument is the most extreme version of the activation sequence: when governance fails completely rather than merely partial, the colonial border does not just become a corridor for militancy, it ceases to function as a meaningful political boundary at all.

[40] To calibrate the scale: Somalia's 9,784 border-zone ACLED events at 12.5 percent exceeds the total event records of Chad(2,449), Niger (5,817), and Kuwait (10) entirely. The country with the most recorded violence in the world by this metric is generating border-zone conflict in absolute terms that dwarfs the entire national conflict records of other states in the sample.The percentage-based dependent variable appropriately captures where conflict concentrates within a country, but it should always be interpreted alongside total event volume when comparing across cases with radically different conflict scales

[41] Border-zone conflict events within 110-kilometer buffer zones, Sub-Saharan Africa. Counterexample states Botswana, Ghana, and Senegal are shown alongside neighboring higher-conflict cases. Despite ABI scores comparable to the most conflict-affected states in the sample, event density within the border belt is comparatively sparse for these institutionally coherent frontier states. Pink shading indicates the 110-kilometer buffer zone. Point density reflects combined ACLED (1997–2018) and GTD (1970–2018) event distributions

[42] Counterexample states Singapore and Malaysia demonstrate limited conflict intensity relative to the buffer area despite high ABI scores. Pink shading indicates the 110-kilometer buffer zone. Point density reflects combined ACLED (1997–2018) and GTD (1970–2018) event distributions.

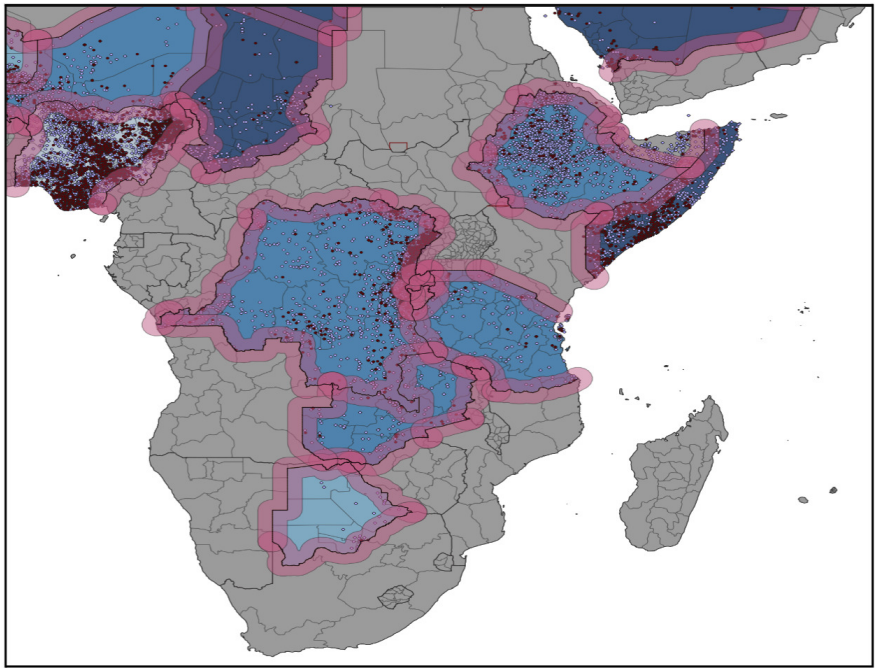

Figure 9: Border-zone conflict events within 110-kilometer buffer zones, Africa[41].

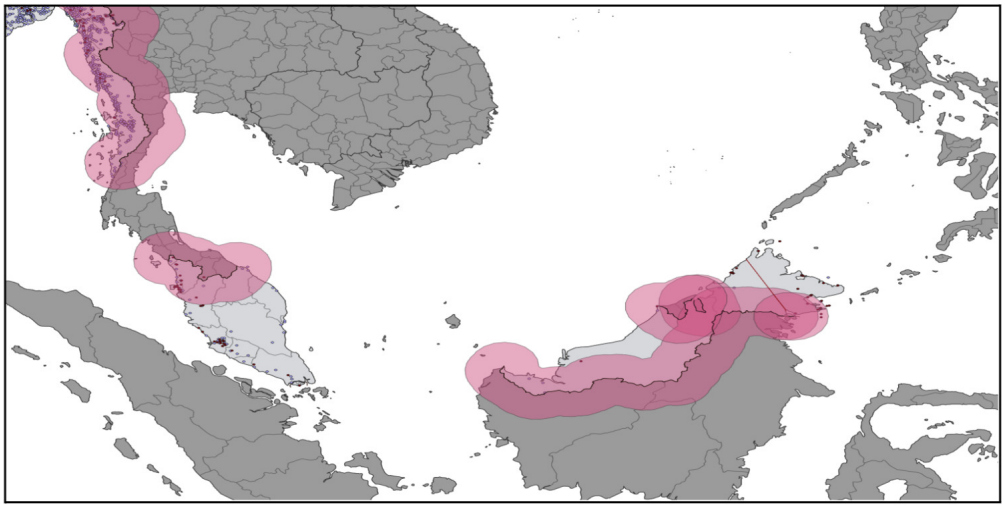

Figure 10: Border-zone conflict events within 110-kilometer buffer zones, Southeast Asia[42].

6.5. Institutional Counterexamples: Artificial Borders, Real Stability

The four archetypes above traced how colonial border artificiality becomes conflict-producing when early frontier governance fails. This section examines the cases that complete the conditional argument: seven states, Singapore, Malaysia, Kuwait, Tunisia, Botswana, Ghana, and Senegal, that inherited highly artificial borders, achieved $RBGF = 0$ codings, and maintained comparatively stable frontiers across the post-independence period (see Figure 9 and 10). Their existence is the most powerful evidence in the paper for the core claim. If artificiality alone drove conflict, these states

could not exist as they do. The fact that they do demonstrates that colonial geometry is never destiny.

6.5.1. Colonial Inheritance and Structural Potential

Each of these seven states inherited borders drawn by imperial powers with little regard for ethnolinguistic geography. Singapore and Malaysia emerged from the British colonial system of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, where administrative boundaries reflected economic extraction zones rather than social communities (Barr and Trocki, 2008). Kuwait's boundaries were fixed by the 1922 Uqair Protocol, which divided the desert with Iraq and Saudi Arabia using geometric coordinates across largely uninhabited land (Casey, 2007). Tunisia's modern frontiers were drawn by the French protectorate between 1881 and 1910, extending across Saharan territory with no connection to administrative logic (Perkins, 2014). Botswana, Ghana, and Senegal inherited borders from the 1884-85 Berlin Conference and subsequent Anglo-French agreements, each cutting across cohesive pre-colonial polities: the Tswana ethnic group straddles Botswana and South Africa, the Ewe are split between Ghana and Togo, and Fulani communities extend across Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania (Englebert, 2000).

According to Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski (2011), these seven states carry ABI scores between 0.9467 and 0.9945, fully comparable to those of the most conflict-affected states in the entire sample. Their divergent outcomes are entirely a function of governance choices made in the decades after independence.

6.5.2. Early Governance and Frontier Integration (1945-1980)

Singapore. After independence in 1965, Singapore faced high ethnic fragmentation and a fully artificial maritime boundary. Under Lee Kuan Yew, the People's Action Party built a disciplined bureaucracy and prioritized multiracial representation through policies including the Group Representation Constituency system. Early public housing and education drives created social cohesion that compensated for geographic vulnerability (Barr and Trocki, 2008). The dataset records $ENGF = 0$, $RBGF = 0$, $ABI = 0.9945$, and a border-event share of 0.0 percent. Critically, Singapore achieved this with a Polity2 average of -4.0 across its foundational decades it was not a liberal democracy but a single-party authoritarian state. Its stability came from the quality and inclusiveness of its governance, not from its regime type, and this distinction is central to the paper's argument.[43]

[43]Singapore's Polity2 average of -4.0 across the foundational window reflects the People's Action Party's authoritarian consolidation of single-party dominance, use of defamation laws against political opponents, and control of media. Freedom House has consistently rated Singapore as "Partly Free." The PAP has won every general election since 1959. Yet Singapore built a bureaucracy that is internationally recognized for competence, rule of law, anti-corruption, and

Malaysia. The Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957 and merged with Sabah and Sarawak in 1963 to form Malaysia. The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) prompted counter-insurgency and political reforms that professionalized local administration and created pathways for Chinese and indigenous populations to participate in the political system (Short, 2014). Federalism balanced central authority with local autonomy in frontier territories. The dataset records $ABI = 0.9467$, $ENGF = 0$, $RBGF = 0$, and a border-event share of 15.5 percent.

Kuwait. Despite straight-line desert borders, Kuwait converted oil wealth into a modern welfare bureaucracy after independence in 1961. Early rulers institutionalized revenue sharing, universal education, and healthcare, ensuring that border communities were tied to state institutions rather than tribal patrons (Casey, 2007). Like Singapore, Kuwait was not democratic its Polity2 average across the foundational window is -8.84, among the most authoritarian scores in the sample. Yet it achieved $RBGF = 0$ and maintained peaceful frontiers through governance quality rather than democratic accountability, a pattern that directly addresses the alternative explanation that counterexample stability is simply a product of liberal democratic institutions. [44] The dataset records $ABI = 0.9885$, $ENGF = 0$, $RBGF = 0$. Kuwait's recorded border-event share of 40.0 percent is based on only 10 total ACLED events and is statistically unreliable for the reasons established in Section 3.

Tunisia. Under President Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia emphasized secular education, women's rights, and rural service delivery from independence in 1956, building a modern administration that extended into border zones with Algeria and Libya despite the country's authoritarian character (Perkins, 2014). Tunisia's Polity2 average is -8.8 across the foundational window firmly authoritarian yet its governance extended administrative reach and basic services to frontier communities in ways that the governance-failure archetypes never did. The dataset records $ABI = 0.9777$, $ENGF = 0$, $RBGF = 0$, and a border-event share of 26.5 percent.

Botswana. Upon independence in 1966, Botswana was one of Africa's poorest countries yet immediately established strong fiscal institutions, property rights, and democratic continuity (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, 2001). Frontier districts were connected through road and veterinary-cordon

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inclusive multiracial service delivery. The governance quality was real even though the democratic credentials were not. This matters because it isolates administrative inclusion and bureaucratic reach the RBGF mechanism.

[44] Kuwait's Polity2 average of -8.84 places it among the most authoritarian cases in the entire 29-country sample, more authoritarian in this measure than several cases coded RBGF=1 with high conflict. The country has a National Assembly with genuine legislative powers, established in 1962, and oil wealth has funded extensive welfare provision. But women did not receive the right to vote until 2005, the Emir retains executive authority, and the country is not a liberal democracy by any standard definition. Its RBGF=0 outcome reflects the specific character of its governance — administratively inclusive,welfare-providing, and bureaucratically present at the frontier — rather than democratic legitimacy in the conventional sense. The Polity2 coefficient in the regression models is not significant in either dataset, which is entirely consistent with this interpretation: it is RBGF, not democracy, that explains frontier stability.

infrastructure linking the Kalahari to Gaborone and Francistown, creating economic interdependence between periphery and core that gave border communities material reasons to identify with the state. The dataset records $ABI = 0.9706$, $ENGF = 0$, $RBGF = 0$. Botswana's border-event share of 46.7 percent is based on only 137 total ACLED events and should be treated as statistically unreliable rather than as a reflection of genuine frontier instability, one of the most extreme small-denominator cases in the sample.[45]

Ghana. The first sub-Saharan state to gain independence in 1957, Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah expanded education, infrastructure, and civil-service presence into northern and eastern border regions. Ghana is coded ENGF=1, reflecting Nkrumah's authoritarian consolidation and eventual overthrow by coup in 1966, but $RBGF = 0$, reflecting that frontier administration and border-community inclusion remained comparatively functional throughout the foundational window despite national political turbulence. Later democratic reforms after 1992 further entrenched inclusive governance (Englebert, 2000). The dataset records $ABI = 0.9571$ and a border-event share of 21.6 percent meaningfully lower than comparably artificial governance-failure states.

Senegal. Under Leopold Sedar Senghor from 1960 onward, Senegal fostered stable multi-party politics and administrative outreach to peripheral zones, establishing a tradition of engagement with frontier communities that distinguished it sharply from its Sahelian neighbors. Close cooperation with Mauritania and the creation of the short-lived Senegambia Confederation (1982-1989) illustrated a sustained commitment to cross-border cooperation rather than confrontation (Herbst, 2000). The dataset records $ABI = 0.9535$, $ENGF = 0$, $RBGF = 0$, and a border-event share of 34.8 percent.

6.5.3. Governance Mechanisms and Spatial Outcomes

Three governance mechanisms explain the consistent relative stability of these seven states. First, the inclusion of peripheral elites and populations: frontier communities were integrated into civil service, military, and representative institutions, reducing the incentives for rebellion and cross-border militancy that exclusion generates. Second, infrastructure and service provision in borderlands: investments in roads, schools, and health networks projected state authority and created economic interdependence between periphery and core, making the state visible at the frontier as a provider rather than solely as an enforcer (Herbst, 2000). Third, regional diplomacy and dispute resolution: early participation in regional organizations including Association for Southeast Asia Nations

[45] Botswana's 137 total ACLED events across the entire 1997-2018 period represents the second-lowest total event count in the sample after Kuwait. At 46.7 percent, approximately 64 events fall within the border belt. This figure is methodologically meaningless as a measure of frontier conflict intensity and is included in the dataset only for completeness.Botswana's qualitative record of democratic stability, peaceful borders, effective veterinary and customs administration at its frontier districts, and absence of any significant frontier insurgency since independence is thoroughly documented(Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, 2001; Herbst, 2000)

(ASEAN) and the Organisation of African Unity encouraged cooperative approaches to cross-border policing and trade rather than confrontation (Herbst, 2000; Englebert, 2000).

The quantitative evidence confirms the pattern across reliable cases. Singapore records 0.0 percent, Malaysia 15.5 percent, Ghana 21.6 percent, Tunisia 26.5 percent, and Senegal 34.8 percent, all substantially below the governance-failure archetype medians, and all coded $RBGF = 0$ with historically inclusive frontier administration. Kuwait and Botswana are excluded from this quantitative comparison because their percentages of 40.0 and 46.7 percent respectively are products of event-count denominators of 10 and 137, not indicators of genuine frontier instability. Their qualitative records, peaceful borders, effective bureaucratic reach, and stable post-independence governance, place them unambiguously alongside the other five counterexamples.[46]

6.5.4. Mechanism Synthesis

These institutional counterexamples complete the conditional argument of the study. Across seven states spanning three continents, high border artificiality combined with early inclusive governance produced comparatively stable frontiers. This is not coincidence and it is not simply a function of democratic governance Singapore, Kuwait, and Tunisia all achieved $RBGF = 0$ outcomes under authoritarian rule, demonstrating that it is the character of governance, specifically its administrative reach, inclusiveness at the periphery, and responsiveness to frontier communities, rather than its regime type, that explains frontier stability. The comparison with the four conflict archetypes confirms that H1 holds artificiality alone predicts nothing. H2 and H3 hold qualitatively across the full sample: regional governance failure is the activating variable that converts colonial geometry into frontier violence, and its absence is the variable that prevents that conversion even where colonial geometry is at its most extreme.

7. Conclusion

This paper began with a puzzle that sits at the intersection of colonial history, postcolonial politics, and the contemporary geography of political violence. If colonial borders were drawn with such systematic indifference to human geography severing ethnic communities, disrupting economic networks, and binding together populations with no shared political identity why have some of the

[46]The full counterexample comparison reinforces the regression's null finding on Polity2. Among the seven counterexamples: Singapore (Polity2=-4.0), Kuwait (Polity2=-8.84), Tunisia (Polity2=-8.8), Ghana (Polity2=-4.0), and Senegal (Polity2=-5.4) all achieved RBGF=0 outcomes under non-democratic or semi-democratic governance. Only Malaysia (Polity2=5.4) and Botswana (Polity2=6.0) scored positively on democracy during the foundational window. The consistent RBGF=0 outcome across states ranging from deeply authoritarian to genuinely democratic confirms that it is governance quality at the frontier — administrative reach, inclusion, and service provision — rather than regime type that produces stable borders.

world's most artificial boundaries remained entirely peaceful while others have become enduring corridors of insurgency, terrorism, and transnational militancy?

The answer this paper advances is straightforward but consequential: the borders themselves are not the primary explanation. Colonial lines created structural potential for frontier fragmentation. What determined whether that potential became organized, persistent violence was the quality of governance that post-independence states built or deliberately chose not to build in the frontier regions during the foundational first twenty-five years of sovereignty.

The quantitative evidence establishes the baseline finding with clarity. Across 29 postcolonial states, using geocoded conflict data from ACLED (1997 to 2018) and the GTD (1970 to 2018) measured within 110-kilometer border belt zones, border artificiality alone is not a statistically significant predictor of border-zone conflict concentration in either dataset. The ABI scores of Singapore (0.9945), Somalia (0.9971), and Niger (0.9823) are effectively indistinguishable. Their conflict outcomes are not. This finding is consistent across both datasets and confirmed visually by the flat bivariate scatter in Figures 2 and 3, and it directly challenges the geographic determinist tradition that has long treated colonial boundary design as an autonomous driver of postcolonial instability (Alesina, Easterly, and Matuszeski, 2011; Herbst, 2000). The statistical models offer directional support for the role of regional governance failure in the ACLED data, but given the constraints of the small sample, severe multicollinearity, and the measurement limitations of the percentage-based dependent variable, these results are treated as preliminary pattern identification. The case evidence carries the substantive argument.

The four regional archetypes each trace the same causal sequence through independent historical contexts, which is precisely what gives the argument its cross-regional force. In the Sahel-Sahara belt, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Libya all inherited extraordinarily artificial boundaries, ABI scores between 0.974 and 0.997, and all chose during their foundational decades to concentrate political and economic resources in capitals while leaving peripheral communities without administration, services, or representation. The consequences were not accidental. Frontier neglect produced legitimacy deficits that armed groups were structurally positioned to exploit, and the transnational insurgencies that now define the Sahelian security landscape are the direct institutional descendants of governance choices made between 1960 and 1985 (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Roessler, 2016).

In South Asia, the same mechanism played out across different colonial inheritances: India's constitutional exceptionalism in Kashmir, Pakistan's deliberate maintenance of FATA's legal exclusion and the subsequent emergence of both the TTP and the Baloch Liberation Army from that vacuum, Afghanistan's century-long refusal to internalize an unratified boundary, and Bangladesh's partial but consequential reversal of frontier exclusion after the 1997 CHT Peace Accord, a within-case test that isolates governance as the operative variable by holding everything else constant.

The Middle East and Horn of Africa archetypes push the argument to its extreme expressions,

where Syria's 54.0 percent ACLED border-event share, the highest in the sample, and the total administrative collapse of the Somali state demonstrate what happens when governance failure is absolute rather than merely partial (Salehyan, 2009; Shapiro, 2013).

The institutional counterexamples close the argument with evidence that is, in some ways, the most powerful of all. Seven states- Singapore, Malaysia, Kuwait, Tunisia, Botswana, Ghana, and Senegal, carry ABI scores between 0.947 and 0.995, fully comparable to the governance-failure archetypes. All seven maintained comparatively stable frontiers. Five of the seven did so under non-democratic or semi-authoritarian governance: Singapore at a Polity2 average of -4.0, Kuwait at -8.84, Tunisia at -8.8, Ghana at -4.0, and Senegal at -5.4. Their stability was not a product of liberal democratic institutions. It was a product of administrative reach, bureaucratic competence, and the extension of political inclusion and public services to peripheral communities, of the decision to make the frontier a part of the state rather than a space beyond it (Herbst, 2000; Englebert, 2000; Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, 2001). The Polity2 coefficient is not significant in either regression model, and this null result is entirely consistent with what the counterexamples show: regime type is not what determines frontier stability. Governance quality at the border is.

This study makes three contributions to the literatures it engages. First, it challenges geographic determinism in artificial border theory by demonstrating that the near-constant variation in ABI across the sample corresponds to enormous variation in conflict outcomes that colonial boundary design alone cannot account for. The shape of the line matters far less than what the post-colonial state built, or failed to build, along it (Englebert, Tarango, and Carter, 2002; Roessler, 2016). Second, it introduces both a temporal dimension and a subnational distinction to state-building theory by isolating the first twenty-five years after independence as the window when frontier governance trajectories lock in, and by demonstrating empirically that national and subnational governance failure are analytically separable variables with different causal footprints, a distinction the India case makes impossible to ignore (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Slater, 2010). Third, it bridges spatial conflict analysis and institutional theory by showing that the geography of violence maps onto the geography of governance failure rather than the geometry of colonial cartography (Buhaug and Rød, 2006; Weidmann, 2015). Where states extended administration and inclusion to peripheral communities, artificial borders became ordinary lines on a map. Where states did not, those same lines became the most consequential boundaries in the world, not because of what the colonial surveyors drew in the nineteenth century, but because of what the post-colonial governments left behind them in the twentieth.

The paper's limitations are genuine and should constrain how its findings are read. The 29-country sample is small. The RBGF and ENGF codings are original binary variables carrying the subjectivity inherent in any historical coding exercise. The regression analysis is exploratory rather than confirmatory. Future research with larger samples, continuous subnational governance measures, and event data disaggregated to the district level could test the mechanism with considerably greater precision. These constraints are acknowledged directly rather than minimized, because the paper's

credibility rests on the honesty of its methods rather than on the strength of claims that the evidence cannot support.

What the evidence does support is this: across four regional archetypes and seven counterexamples spanning three continents, the pattern is consistent enough to constitute a genuine finding. Governance failure at the frontier activates the conflict potential of artificial borders. Governance success deactivates it. Colonial lines will not be redrawn. But the states that grew up around them still face a choice about how far their authority and their obligation to citizens actually extends. The frontier has always been the truest measure of that choice.

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APPENDIX A: Coding Rubric for ENGF and RBGF

Early National Governance Failure (ENGF) is coded 1 when, during the first twenty-five post-independence years, the state exhibited sustained exclusionary rule and/or repeated extra-constitutional transfers of power that prevented nationwide institutional consolidation. ENGF is coded 0 when national political institutions maintained basic continuity across the foundational window, regardless of regime type.

Regional Border Governance Failure (RBGF) is coded 1 when border regions specifically lacked durable administrative presence, meaningful public service provision, incorporation of peripheral elites into national political structures, and effective cross-border security coordination during the foundational window. RBGF is coded 0 when the state extended sufficient administrative reach and inclusion to frontier communities to establish legitimate governing authority at the periphery, even under non-democratic national governance.

The two divergent cases are India ($ENGF = 0$, $RBGF = 1$), nationally stable but frontier-exclusionary, and Ghana ($ENGF = 1$, $RBGF = 0$), nationally disrupted by coup but with comparatively functional frontier administration. Full country codings are presented in Table 1 in Appendix B.

Table 1: Master Dataset comprising of GTD, ACLED , ABI, RBGF and NGF along with specific ACLED and GTD event count within 110Km.[a]

Final_master_dataset_110Km_dist

country	total_ACLED_events	border_ACLED_events	border_ACLED_event_pct	total_events_gtd	border_events_gtd	border_event_pct_gtd	ISO3	Year_of_Independence	Early_National_Governance_Failure	Regional_Border_Gov_Failure	Polity2_Avg_0_20	ABI	Case_Type
Afghanistan	124504.0	30556.0	24.54	18915.0	6189.0	32.718333685767870	AFG	1919.0	1.0	1.0	-6.48	0.9612	Core
Bangladesh	11714.0	5389.0	46.0	1741.0	745.0	42.791409138426520	BGD	1947.0	1.0	1.0	-4.49	0.9643	Core
Botswana	137.0	64.0	46.72	9.0	7.0	77.77777777777780	BWA	1966.0	0.0	0.0	6.0	0.970557	Counter
Chad	2449.0	901.0	36.79	131.0	78.0	59.541984732824440	TCD	1960.0	1.0	1.0	-6.29	0.98248	Core
Democratic Republic Of Congo	46079.0	19069.0	41.38	1498.0	968.0	64.619492656875800	COD	1960.0	1.0	1.0		0.9758	Core
Ethiopia	19541.0	2369.0	12.12	252.0	59.0	23.412698412698400	ETH	1941.0	1.0	1.0	-8.2	0.98073	Core
Ghana	3128.0	677.0	21.64	34.0	7.0	20.588235294117600	GHA	1957.0	1.0	0.0	-4.0	0.9571	Counter
India	28363.0	8366.0	29.5	13905.0	4242.0	30.507011866235200	IND	1947.0	0.0	1.0	5.19	0.97334	Core
Iraq	86560.0	25058.0	28.95	27515.0	1753.0	6.371070325277120	IRQ	1932.0	1.0	1.0	-3.76	0.968928	Core
Kuwait	10.0	4.0	40.0	71.0	29.0	40.845070422535200	KWT	1961.0	0.0	0.0	-8.84	0.9885359	Counter
Liberia	1540.0	644.0	41.82	35.0	28.0	80.0	LBR	1847.0	1.0	1.0	4.0	0.954	Mid
Libya	16529.0	304.0	1.84	2502.0	34.0	1.358913869704240	LBY	1951.0	1.0	1.0	-7.0	0.997	Core
Malaysia	206.0	32.0	15.53	102.0	30.0	29.411764705882400	MYS	1957.0	0.0	0.0	5.43	0.9467151	Counter
Mali	17519.0	5057.0	28.87	1009.0	337.0	33.399405351833 5	MLI	1960.0	1.0	1.0	-7.0	0.9742	Core
Mauritania	404.0	94.0	23.27	15.0	2.0	13.333333333333300	MRT	1960.0	1.0	1.0	-6.71	0.98403	Mid
Myanmar	95001.0	21989.0	23.15	721.0	302.0	41.886269070735 10	MMR	1948.0	1.0	1.0		0.95198	Mid
Niger	5817.0	2531.0	45.23	257.0	163.0	63.424124513618 70	NER	1960.0	1.0	1.0	-4.33	0.98233	Core
Nigeria	52098.0	10142.0	19.47	5549.0	1489.0	26.833663723193400	NGA	1960.0	1.0	1.0	-1.14	0.96837	Core
Pakistan	34348.0	11178.0	32.54	15487.0	3738.0	24.136372441402500	PAK	1947.0	1.0	1.0	1.19	0.9733	Core
Rwanda	1317.0	550.0	49.35	168.0	100.0	59.523809523809500	RWA	1962.0	0.0	0.0	-5.95	0.92795	Mid
Saudi Arabia	5752.0	2565.0	46.33	580.0	135.0	23.275862068965500	SAU	1932.0	0.0	0.0	-10.0	0.99972	Mid
Senegal	2058.0	717.0	34.84	122.0	69.0	56.557377049180300	SEN	1960.0	0.0	0.0	-5.38	0.953545	Counter
Sierra Leone	4040.0	1546.0	40.74	101.0	65.0	64.356435643564400	SLE	1961.0	1.0	1.0	-1.81	0.94497	Mid
Singapore		0	0	5.0	0.0	0.0	SGP	1965.0	0.0	0.0	-4.0	0.994543	Counter
Somalia	78274.0	9807.0	12.53	5315.0	549.0	10.327313769751700	SOM	1960.0	1.0	1.0	-1.0	0.99708	Core
Syria	192045.0	103733.0	54.01	2957.0	1104.0	37.335136963313830	SYR	1946.0	1.0	1.0	-0.89	0.98893	Core
Tanzania	1588.0	389.0	24.5	69.0	22.0	31.884057971014500	TZA	1961.0	0.0	0.0	-6.0	0.974936	Counter
Tunisia	4273.0	1131.0	26.47	149.0	78.0	52.348993288590600	TUN	1956.0	0.0	0.0	-8.76	0.9775515	Counter
Zambia	1775.0	816.0	45.97	54.0	24.0	44.444444444444400	ZMB	1964.0	0.0	0.0	-5.19	0.9805092	Counter

[a] Table 1 presents the complete Final Master Dataset, including all key variables for the 29 countries in the sample, which forms the empirical basis for the descriptive analysis in Section 1.5 and the case evidence in Section 1.6.

APPENDIX B: Exploratory OLS Regression Results

These results are reported as preliminary pattern identification only. Given the small sample ($N = 26$), severe multicollinearity between RBGF and the interaction term (condition number $= 1,121$), and the measurement limitations of the percentage-based dependent variable, they should not be read as confirmatory tests of the hypotheses.

Table 2: OLS Regression: Border-Zone Conflict Share.[a] [b]

	ACLED % Conflict	GTD % Conflict
Intercept	-45.74 (313.49)	230.27 (203.71)
ABI	-189.91 (325.02)	83.87 (211.21)
Regional_Border_Gov_Failure	704.22 (295.61)	672.22** (454.89)
ABI_X_RBGF	-690.27*** (305.03)	-724.14 (469.40)
Polity2_Avg_0_20	-0.10 (0.62)	0.43 (0.96)
Early_National_Governance_Failure	-7.03 (9.86)	-9.62 (15.17)
R-squared	0.30	0.33
R-squared Adj.	0.12	0.17
No. observations	26	26

[a] The interaction term is negative in ACLED and not significant in GTD, opposite to H3's prediction. See Section 5 and footnote 27 for full discussion.
[b] Standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.05$.

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Voices After Violence: A Cross-Platform Analysis of Social Media Reactions to Terrorist Attacks

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Abstract: Public reactions to terrorism on social media have been widely studied, revealing surges in fear, anger, and polarized political discourse immediately following attacks. However, little comparative research exists regarding how these reactions vary across distinct online architectures. This study analyzes 47,536 English-language user comments from Reddit and YouTube posted in the week following three highly publicized terror attacks in the United States. Using two distinct bidirectional language models, we analyzed the datasets to assess sentiment and emotional tone. Across all three case studies, Reddit comments were, on average, significantly more neutral than YouTube comments. An average sentiment score of -0.042 on Reddit compared to YouTube's -0.0583 implies greater negativity on the video-sharing site, necessitating diverging methods to prevent disinformation or radicalization. Sentiment proportions revealed heightened bimodality of YouTube comments. The proportion of neutral comments was far greater at 28.77% than YouTube's 19.92%. This distribution indicates that YouTube responses reflect a relatively more polarized emotional climate with fewer moderate reactions, reinforcing the potential for a pathos-based strategy in mitigating extreme reactions. Elevated levels of joy and sadness on YouTube further highlight this emotional bimodality. These findings highlight the necessity for policymakers to develop platform-specific strategies to prevent the spread of misinformation and counter extremist rhetoric in digital spaces.

Keywords: Social media, terrorism, sentiment analysis, Reddit, YouTube, polarization

1. Introduction

The rise of social media has drastically transformed global discourse, enabling billions of users to contribute opinions, reactions, and beliefs to public debate. These platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of breaking news, allowing significant events to be broadcast in real time globally. As live information circulates, immediate reactions emerge across a spectrum of sites (Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022). These range from text-heavy discussion forums like Reddit to video-centric outlets such as YouTube. The dynamics of this evolving digital landscape offer a valuable opportunity to analyze public sentiment in the wake of major security incidents. In the post-9/11 era, the psychological impact of terrorist attacks became a primary focus of social science research. Early studies used telephone and email surveys, but social media has since enabled real-time analysis of public sentiment. This shift allowed for a more granular understanding of immediate responses to terrorism (Galea et al., 2002; Bove et al., 2024). Extensive analysis of post-attack sentiment has consistently revealed heightened anger and fear, often coupled with the embracement of extreme political rhetoric (Völker , 2023) . Real-time analysis further allows researchers to track how sentiment shifts as time passes and new information surfaces (Bove et al., 2024). This study investigates how responses to terrorist attacks differ between Reddit and YouTube following the 2025 New Orleans truck attack, the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, and the 2015 San Bernardino attack. All three events were selected because of their high media coverage, links to foreign terrorist organizations, and setting on American soil. Through a combination of sentiment analysis and BERT-based emotional classification, we examine how varying social media ecosystems respond to identical acts of violence. Sentiment analysis refers to the computational classification of text into positive, negative, or neutral categories. Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) is a model that analyzes language from both directions (left-to-right and right-to-left), capturing deeper semantic meaning than traditional linear models. We anticipate that the structural differences in platform architecture, such as anonymity and content format, will lead to significant variations in emotional tone and sentiment. Understanding these variations is critical for designing targeted communication strategies that mitigate panic and extremism.

2. Background and Motivation

Following significant territorial losses between 2014 to 2017, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) increased efforts to disseminate its message via English-speaking media to garner international sympathy (Qi, 2024). Rather than strictly predicated on regional, religious, or ethnic bases, the modern audience for terrorist rhetoric is global, thus underscoring why international sentiment is pivotal for security policy (Nussio et al., 2021). The United States' role in the Global War on Terrorism compels the state into the forefront of terrorism-related discourse. Romney et al. (2021) analyzed Arabic Twitter posts from 2014 to 2015, finding that the US is viewed as a key actor in terror disputes. Notably, 29% of users in the study believed US actions were directly associated with ISIS, while 27% believed the US was associated with adjacent state actors like Syria and Iran. This highlights the complex web of blame that permeates online discourse (Romney et al.,

2021). Research on terrorism-related discourse demonstrates that negative sentiment spikes across platforms following major attacks. Bove et al. (2024) provided groundwork for interpreting digitized reactions to terror through the NRC Emotion Lexicon, analyzing 324,000 Twitter/X users. Their results demonstrated heightened negative emotions –specifically fear and anger– following eight major terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom between 2016 and 2020. Mansour (2018) solidified these trends as international phenomena, using an Opinion Lexicon dictionary in R to reveal that Twitter/X users in both Western and Eastern-oriented countries utilize highly similar rhetoric regarding terrorism, suggesting that negative sentiment transcends cultural divisions. This prevalence of negativity extends to YouTube. Czymaraa et al. (2022) reviewed roughly 100,000 YouTube comments following attacks in Germany, France and the United Kingdom, finding a disproportionate surge in hate speech and ethnically insulting language. While it is established that political events trigger hostility on platforms like Facebook and Reddit, previous works have not sufficiently compared whether these specific patterns of negativity are consistent across platforms or unique to specific architectures (Sandoval-Almazan & Valle-Cruz, 2020; Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022). As such, further research is required to understand these trends on a multi-platform level. Younger generations' increased reliance on social media as a news source further necessitates this study. The digital age has revolutionized the capacity for young people to share, exchange, and interpret information on current events. In 2019, 73% of Americans used YouTube, a figure that rose to 81% by 2021. In the same period, Reddit usage increased from 11% to 18% (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Furthermore, social media has also gained traction for third-party news sources, with Mitchell et al. (2016) finding that "81% of Americans [got] at least some [international] news through websites, apps or social networking sites" in 2016. These growth trends, in conjunction with the potential for terrorist networks to manipulate foreign supporters remotely through cognitive control, environmental control, and emotional control, necessitate the identification of particularly vulnerable platforms (González et al., 2022). Pre-existing literature has established several key ideas associated with public reactions to terrorism: first, that the emotional impact of terror is expanding alongside the growth of terrorist networks; second, that these effects are reaching more people as social media platforms become lucrative tools for supporting discourse; and third, that these effects are not consistent across all social media platforms. Our investigation strives to address the third point by systematically comparing sentiment across Reddit and YouTube. By identifying platform-specific trends, we seek to understand the uniqueness of varying online architectures in terrorism-related discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

3.1.1. Event Selection and Timeframe

This study examines public responses to three terrorist attacks that occurred in the United States – the New Orleans truck attack on January 1st, 2025, the Orlando nightclub shooting on June 12th,

Table 1: Keywords Used in Analysis.

2015 San Bernardino Attack	2016 Orlando Attack	2025 New Orleans Attack
San Bernardino	Orlando	New Orleans
Inland Regional Center	Pulse	Bourbon Street
Syed Rizwan Farook	Nightclub	Shasmud-Din Jabbar
Tashfeen Malik	Omar Mateen	Truck attack
Shooting	Shooting	Vehicle-ramming attack
Mass shooting	Mass shooting	Terror
Terror	Terror	Terrorist
Terrorist	Terrorist	Terrorism
Terrorism	Terrorism	ISIS
Al-Qaeda	ISIS	
ISIS		

2016, and the San Bernardino shooting on December 2nd, 2015. Data were collected during the seven days following each attack to capture immediate public reactions. A seven-day window was selected to capture the peak of public discourse, aligning with the typical lifespan of major news stories.

3.1.2. Platform Selection

Reddit: A discussion-based platform with structured communities (subreddits) and high user anonymity. Comments are typically dialogic and longer.
YouTube: A video-based outlet on engaging multimedia content.

3.1.3. Keywords

A keyword list (Table 1) was developed to ensure broad coverage. Terms included the city, names of attackers, relevant groups, specific locations (e.g., nightclub, hospital), type of attack, and general terms such as "terrorism".

3.2. Reddit Data Extraction

Reddit data were collected using the RedditExtractoR package in RStudio, which retrieves posts containing specified keywords, extracts URLs, and scrapes associated comments. Scraping was conducted in specific subreddits, tailored communities within Reddit that focus on certain topics. Subreddits were chosen based on relevance, size, and activity level, ensuring inclusion of both general-interest forums (e.g., r/news) and location-specific communities (e.g., r/Orlando). The common

subreddits for each case study were "politics", "news", "worldnews", "usa", "crime", "gunpolitics", "guns", "InternationalNews", and "islam". Additionally, individualized subreddits based on location for further discussion analysis were included: For San Bernardino: “California” and “SanBernardino”. For Orlando: “Florida”, “Orlando”, and “lgbt”. For New Orleans: “Louisiana”, “NewOrleans”, and “NOLA”. Posts and comments were filtered to the seven-day post-event window; all other content was excluded. Cleaned comments were stored as datasets for analysis.

3.3. YouTube Data Extraction

YouTube data were collected by accessing the YouTube Data API v3 in Python, using Google Cloud credentials, including a client ID and client secret. We utilized Python to collect all videos and their comments including at least one of the keywords associated with their respective event during the case’s given week-long timeframe. The Python script was written primarily by Rishit Chatterjee, a master’s student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, whom we thank for his contributions to this process. Through these mechanisms, we were able to collect the text of each comment, as well as crucial supplementary details which allowed us to confirm the validity of our data including: Each comment’s publication date. Each comment’s author. Each comment’s corresponding video (video ID, title, and URL). From each of these videos, all comments matching the same set of keywords were scraped and arranged into CSV files for further analysis.

3.4. Data Processing and Cleaning

Data was put through a cleaning function to facilitate both the sentiment and emotional models in their analysis. Deleted comments were removed from the data. All text was put in lowercase to ensure identical words (e.g. “anger” vs. “Anger”) were not tokenized differently by the model. All uniform resource locators (URLs) were also removed from the data due to irrelevance. For Reddit data, user or subreddit mentions, signified by a “u/” or “r/”, were removed for the same reason. Additionally, extra whitespace and markdown symbols were removed due to possible interference with analysis accuracy. Non-English language data was excluded to facilitate processing.

3.5. Sentiment and Emotional Analysis

3.5.1. Tooling and Environment

Analyses were conducted in Google Colab with GPU acceleration to process computationally intensive transformer models. For sentiment classification, we used Cardiff NLP’s RoBERTa model (cardiffnlp/twitter-roberta-base-sentiment), fine-tuned on Twitter data. For emotion classification, we used Hartmann’s DistilRoBERTa model, trained off of Twitter, Reddit, TV dialogue, and student self-report data to detect anger, disgust, joy, neutral, sadness, and surprise in English text.

Table 2: Comment Count per Case.

Case Study	Number of Comments
Orlando (Reddit)	13,704
San Bernardino (Reddit)	9,233
New Orleans (Reddit)	6,413
Orlando (YouTube)	6,901
San Bernardino (YouTube)	2,772
New Orleans (YouTube)	8,513

3.6. Comparative Analysis

Results were aggregated by case study and social media platform. Proportions of each sentiment and emotion were visualized using bar charts, and overall proportions were stored in two summary tables for cross-platform comparison. Comment counts varied across events and platforms (Table 2). To address sample size imbalance, analyses were conducted using proportions rather than raw frequencies, allowing direct cross-platform comparisons.

4. Results

A total of 47,536 comments were collected from Reddit and YouTube across all case studies. Figure 1 presents the average sentiment score per platform. On average, Reddit comments exhibited a higher, or less negative, sentiment score than YouTube comments. A one-sided Welch's t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant ($p = 6.518 \times 10^{-8}$), indicating that the likelihood of observing a difference of this magnitude by random chance, assuming no true difference exists, is extremely low. In all case studies, YouTube comments were slightly more negative on average than their Reddit counterparts.

Analysis of sentiment proportions revealed modest variation in negative sentiment between platforms (Table 3). The average proportion of negative sentiment was 66.40% for Reddit and 70.07 % for YouTube. Neutral sentiment showed a more pronounced disparity– Reddit comments were neutral 28.77 % of the time, compared with only 19.92 % for YouTube. In contrast, positive sentiment was markedly higher on YouTube, more than double the proportion observed on Reddit. These results suggest a bimodal sentiment distribution on YouTube, characterized by high proportions of both positive and negative comments but relatively little neutrality. This is illustrated in Figure 2, where YouTube's yellow and blue bars are on average greater than their Reddit counterparts.

Comparisons of emotional tone between Reddit and YouTube revealed differences in neutrality, joy, and sadness, as displayed in Table 4 and Figure 3. Neutral comments were notably more prevalent on Reddit, accounting between 37–38 % of discussions for each of the case studies, compared

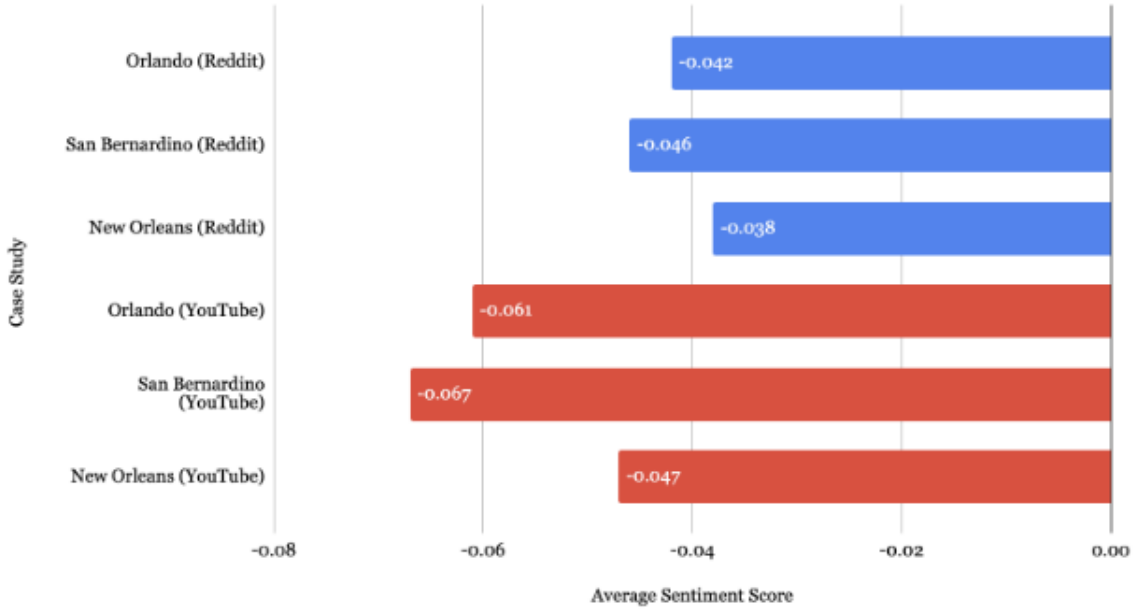

Figure 1: Average Sentiment Score by Case Study

with only 17–27% on YouTube. This offers additional support for neutrality's heightened prevalence on Reddit, while being comparatively less common on YouTube. In contrast, YouTube comments demonstrated higher proportions of both joy and sadness. The average proportion of comments with joy as the dominant emotion was nearly twice as frequent on YouTube compared with Reddit (8.06% vs. 4.89%). Similarly, sadness occurred at higher rates on YouTube (12.39%) than Reddit (7.49%). These findings indicate that YouTube comments tended to be more polarized, with stronger expressions of both positive and negative emotions. Anger was a prominent emotion on both platforms, though with some variation by case study. On Reddit, anger ranged from 17.68 to 25.23%, while on YouTube it ranged from 17.12% to 27.66%. Overall, levels of anger were extremely similar, though the YouTube discussion surrounding Orlando displayed the highest proportion of anger at 27.66%, higher by more than 2% of any other discussion. Surprise was expressed more frequently on YouTube (19.35–22.10%) than Reddit (12.59–16.28%), suggesting that YouTube commenters often adopted a more reactive or astonished tone. Fear occurred at similar levels across both platforms. Average disgust was higher on Reddit (5.58%) compared with YouTube (3.84%), making it the only negative emotion more common in Reddit discussions. Taken together, these results show that Reddit discussions were characterized by high neutrality and modest emotional expression, whereas YouTube conversations reflected lower neutrality but stronger expressions of joy, sadness, and surprise.

Table 3: Sentiment Proportion by Case.

Case Study	Negative Sentiment (%)	Neutral Sentiment (%)	Positive Sentiment (%)
Orlando (Reddit)	65.94	28.86	5.19
San Bernardino (Reddit)	70.17	26.17	3.65
New Orleans (Reddit)	63.08	31.29	5.62
Orlando (YouTube)	72.02	16.06	11.92
San Bernardino (YouTube)	69.70	21.89	8.41
New Orleans (YouTube)	68.49	21.80	9.71

Table 4: Emotion Proportion by Case.

Case Study	Neutral (%)	Anger (%)	Surprise (%)	Joy (%)	Fear (%)	Disgust (%)	Sadness (%)
Orlando (Reddit)	37.13	22.34	13.56	5.11	7.94	6.31	7.60
San Bernardino (Reddit)	37.73	25.23	12.59	4.44	9.23	5.09	5.68
New Orleans (Reddit)	38.03	17.68	16.28	5.11	8.37	5.34	9.19
Orlando (YouTube)	17.79	27.66	19.35	8.97	8.36	3.87	14.01
San Bernardino (YouTube)	22.79	24.67	22.10	7.44	9.93	3.72	9.35
New Orleans (YouTube)	26.10	17.12	19.93	7.78	11.33	3.93	13.81

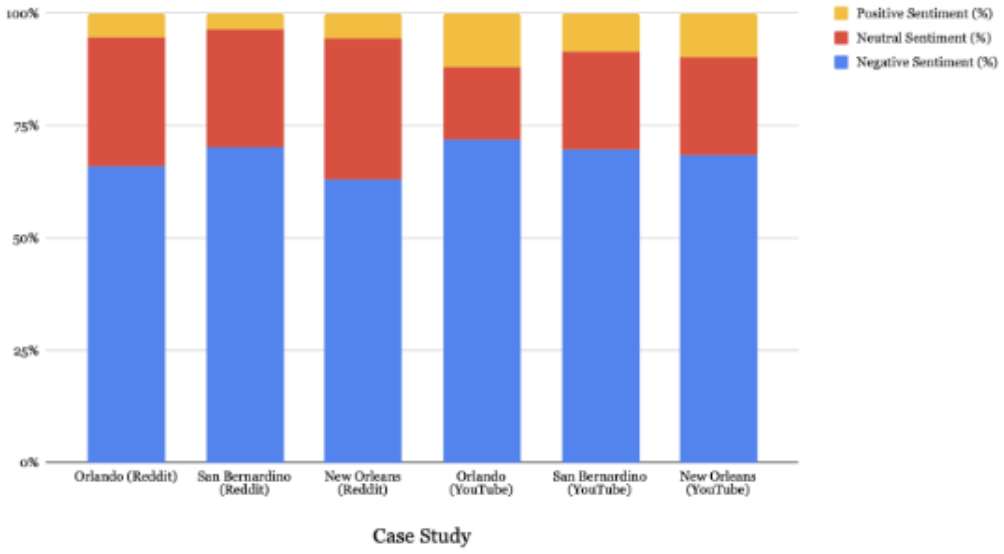

Figure 2: Sentiment Proportions from Collected Data

5. Discussion/Interpretation

Our findings demonstrate that there is a difference between how users on different social media platforms respond to terror attacks during periods directly following violence. Given controlled key words and search criteria, our results showed that YouTube users tend to respond more negatively, on average, to instances of terror in their week-long wakes, as compared to Reddit users. This is most directly reflected by YouTube comments' more negative average sentiment score of -0.0583 compared to Reddit's -0.042 over our three selected cases. This small yet statistically significant 0.0163 difference may potentially be the result of YouTube being a platform that focuses primarily on providing visual content while Reddit specializes more in providing text-based content and hosting online discussions. The tendency for YouTube users to express greater levels of negative sentiment is also affirmed by the sentiment proportions we found. Not only was the average portion of negative sentiment lower for Reddit comments than YouTube comments, but our data also showed greater levels of volatility in YouTube sentiment, with proportions being more similar than those of the Reddit data. This could suggest that, despite YouTube's average sentiment score being lower, comments on this platform are not necessarily more frequently negative than positive. Rather, negative comments on YouTube may simply be more extreme in their negativity. These findings may serve as further evidence of the pattern of increased hate speech and malicious language appearing on YouTube following instances of terror, as originally identified by Czymaraa et al. (2022). The emotional proportions of our data show a similar trend, with YouTube comments demonstrating more variance across 5 of the 7 emotions analyzed. With Reddit displaying significantly higher levels of neutrality across our data, we expect that users of this text-based platform utilize its services as a means to provide objective commentary or third-party information on events, rather than raw, unfiltered emotional reaction which might be more prevalent on YouTube (as indicated by

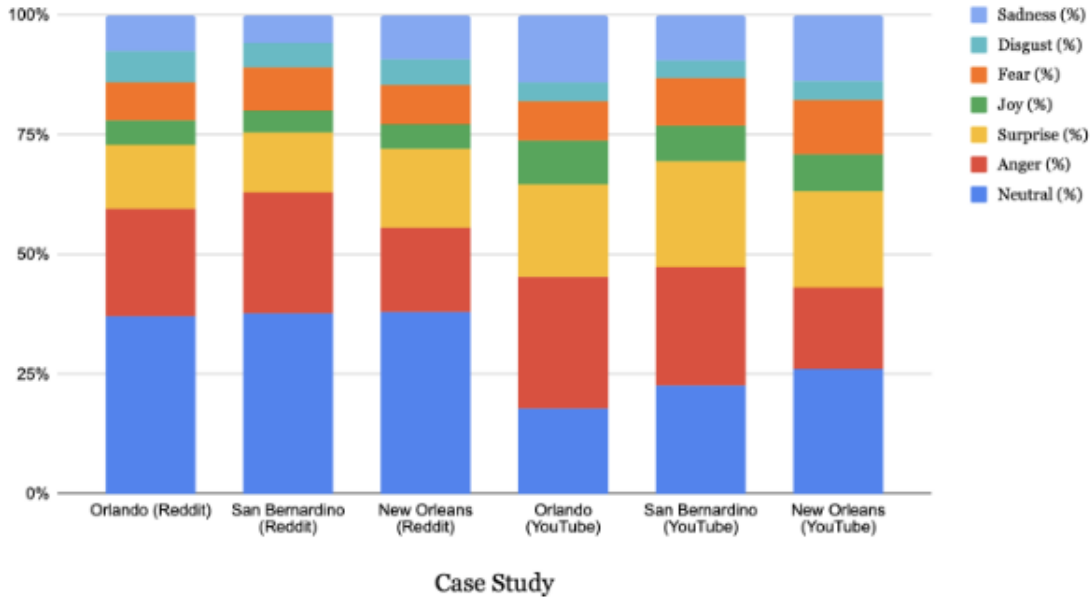

Figure 3: Emotion Proportions from Collected Data

YouTube's higher proportion of "surprise"). It is worth noting, however, that the observations we have made based on proportions of sentiment in our data may be confounded by sample size, to some extent. What appears in our graphs to be heightened variance in the sentiment of YouTube comments may also be impacted by the fact that we collected fewer comments in two out of three cases from YouTube than we did from Reddit, which may have impacted how these proportions were weighted. This affects the reliability of our results, and future research into similar topics could stand to benefit from controlled sample sizes for more accurate comparisons. Additionally, given content moderation guidelines from both Reddit and YouTube, comments promoting violence or extremist views may have been taken down by the time of our collection. This could affect overall sentiment proportions in either direction. Support for the attack would still be categorized as 'positive' while threats of harm would be 'negative'. Another limitation of our study was that we focused entirely on English language comments, making it difficult to assert that the trends we observed were truly representative of the entire international social media community on either platform. For a more holistic overview of this topic, other languages would have to be taken into account in order to identify patterns in terror-related sentiment on a truly global scale. Given this study's focus on ISIS and al-Qaeda, non-English comments could provide another dimension of reactions regarding sentiment in states where these groups are more prominent. The overall policy implications of our findings are related to respective social media policies as well as formal legislators on a wider basis. We demonstrated that a disparity between various platforms and their architecture plays a role in public responses to events of terror in terms of the sentiment of their language. As such, in order to incentivize de-radicalization on their sites and apps, social media companies may stand to benefit from moderation and censorship policies which are specifically tailored to their content and service

styles. Platforms known for highlighting specific creators based on follower or subscriber counts, such as YouTube in our case, may also be able to control rates of extreme or hateful comments by setting protocols or guidelines for content creators covering crisis events. The degree to which negative comments may have real-world consequences is an aspect of our investigation which demands further research, yet given that ethnic and religious-based hate speech has been shown to increase following terrorist attacks, mitigating these byproducts of terror would be a benevolent endeavour. In terms of direct legislative-decisionmaking on the governmental level, our research also may help inform policy choices. To ensure that offline sentiment following terror attacks does not worsen over time too steeply, our findings demonstrate why it may be valuable to support efforts to legislate algorithm transparency. This would benefit the international community insofar as providing a more detailed understanding of the extent to which social media sites and their algorithms (which tend to favor radical content) are complicit in prompting radical responses.

6. Conclusion

Understanding how users respond to terrorist attacks across different social media platforms is essential for developing strategies to counter misinformation and prevent the spread of harmful rhetoric. Designing specific communication approaches to the emotional dynamics of each online site can allow policymakers to disseminate vital information more effectively, helping to contain both fear and distrust in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. This study identified differences between Reddit and YouTube in user sentiment. Reddit discussions were found to be more neutral and text-oriented, reflecting an informational and deliberative style. In contrast, YouTube conversations were less neutral and more emotionally polarized, with relatively heightened proportions of both joy and sadness. These differences could potentially reflect the characteristics of each platform: Reddit's text-based, discussion-driven design fosters neutrality, while YouTube's video-centered environment amplifies emotional reactions, whether shock or hope. One possible interpretation is that neutrality on Reddit does not signal disengagement, but rather fosters a place where users can prioritize debate or information-sharing. In contrast, the greater polarity observed on YouTube could suggest that video-based content triggers emotional responses more directly, evoking both empathy and outrage. The same tragic event, therefore, produces varying climates depending on platform architecture. These findings carry implications for policymakers in communication. If neutrality dominates Reddit, then official information campaigns may be better received if factual updates or corrective messaging is utilized. By contrast, YouTube's heightened polarity means that interventions may need to focus on the emotional side—amplifying solidarity, while mitigating harmful spreads of fear or anger. Recognizing these differences can enable policymakers to adapt their messaging in ways that align with the prevailing emotional tones of each space, effectively managing harmful sentiment. At a broader level, this research proposes the idea that digital platforms are not entirely similar spaces of discourse. They are socially distinct environments that hold the power to shape public reactions. Terrorist attacks, which already provoke high emotional stakes, are therefore filtered not just through the events themselves but through the infrastructure and style of

the platforms they are communicated about on. Finally, these results emphasize the importance for future inquiry. Comparative research with other platforms, such as X, TikTok, or Facebook, could reveal further nuances in the continuum of neutrality versus polarity. Moreover, longitudinal analyses of comments can provide deeper insight into how prominent neutrality, anger, or joy are in the wake of a terrorist attack. In conclusion, the divergent emotional landscapes of Reddit and YouTube reveal that the way people talk about terrorism online is inseparable from where they talk about it. Recognizing these differences is a crucial step toward building digital communities capable of withstanding disinformation and sustaining constructive dialogue in the face of violent events.

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No Peace, No Illusion (Part I): Russia's Long-Term Confrontation Strategy

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1. Russia's Long-Term Confrontation Strategy

Europe's post-World War II security architecture was built around the expectation that major aggression would be overt enough, attributable enough, and legally legible enough to cross recognized thresholds for collective response (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1949, 2024). Russia's confrontation with the West has steadily eroded that assumption. Over the past decade, Moscow has normalized a mode of conflict in which sabotage, covert action, disinformation, and other forms of hybrid pressure function not as episodic crises but as part of a broader and sustained campaign. This pattern accelerated after 2014 and especially following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025). In this framework, peace is not the default condition interrupted by war; it is a temporary lull within a sustained confrontation. The result is a mismatch in threat perception. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) often interpret Russian actions as destabilizing but fundamentally below the threshold of conventional war (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024). The Kremlin's security elite, by contrast, increasingly interprets the same confrontation through a wartime lens (Bartles, 2016; Gerasimov, 2013).

Crucially, this behavior is not merely tactical opportunism. It reflects a deeper shift in Russian strategic thought. Since the late 2000s, and especially following the domestic protests of 2011-2012

and the perceived lessons of the "color revolutions," the Kremlin's security elite has increasingly treated internal political stability, information control, and regime survival as inseparable from national defense (Gerasimov, 2013). In this worldview, nonmilitary pressure is not competition short of war but the opening phase of war itself. Western measures, particularly sanctions and other nonmilitary responses to Russian aggression, are framed by Western governments as tools of deterrence and as means of avoiding war, but interpreted in Moscow as mechanisms of regime destabilization and as components of war itself (Bartles, 2016; Blinken, 2022; Gerasimov, 2013).

1.1. Background and Motivation

Existing scholarship on Russian conduct comprises several distinct but overlapping strands. One body of work examines Russian doctrine and military-strategic thought. This research follows the development of concepts like active defense, strategic deterrence, and escalation management (Bartles, 2016; Galeotti, 2014, 2018; Kofman et al., 2021; Thomas & Orenstein, 2021). It also analyzes the integration of offensive and defensive action across the theater of war. Much of this scholarship engages key Russian doctrinal texts, especially those by Gerasimov (2013, 2019), Ostankov (2019), and Zarudnitskiy (2021). To extend this line of analysis, this project draws directly on additional Russian primary sources including Frunze (1921), Sokolovskiy (1963), Ogarkov (1986), and the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014). These help to identify the longer trajectory of Russian strategic thought and place contemporary debates in a wider historical context.

A second strand investigates the structure and operating logic of the Russian intelligence and security services. It also looks at the framework through which they interpret threats. The term color revolutions generally describes a wave of largely nonviolent, election-driven protest movements in post-communist states, especially in the post-Soviet space, that challenged incumbent regimes and in some cases led to regime change. Western analyses map their institutional development, organizational roles, and operational behavior (Bowen, 2021, 2025; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023; Galeotti, 2019a, 2019b). Related work highlights the ideological and regime-security lens through which these institutions interpret threats. This involves framing internal unrest, color revolutions, and confrontation with the West as interconnected dangers to regime survival and state security (Greene et al., 2025; Hedenskog et al., 2016). Russian investigative research from the Dossier Center adds detail on their internal practices and political character (Dossier Center, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). Together, this literature shows that Russian external behavior is mediated not only by doctrine but also by a coercive security apparatus.

A third body of literature documents Russian hybrid warfare through specific empirical cases. This work examines sabotage, disinformation, covert action, proxy activity, cyber operations, and other instruments used below the threshold of formal war (Ålander & Oksanen, 2024; Bowser, 2025; Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025; Gurcov, 2025; Jones, 2025). These studies are useful for establishing the scope and cumulative scale of such operations across different contexts.

A fourth strand examines NATO, deterrence, and collective defense under conditions of hybrid ambiguity, including official institutional frameworks and independent policy analyses of allied response. This work emphasizes resilience, preparedness, coordination, and deterrence adaptation under persistent sub-threshold coercion, while also highlighting the problems of credibility and political discretion in collective defense (Bajarūnas, 2025; Beznosiuk, 2026; Greene et al., 2026; Kross & Mills, 2025; Lilly, 2025; McGrath, 2024; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024; Rutte, 2025).

This project argues that Russian conduct cannot be explained through any single lens. Instead, it connects historical, doctrinal, institutional, ideological, and operational levels of analysis within one framework. This approach shows how the evolution of Russian military thought, the consolidation of a regime-centered threat-perception worldview, the role of the siloviki-Russia's coercive-security elite-in translating ideology into action, and the use of hybrid methods combine to produce a coherent long-term revisionist strategy. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Russia is not pursuing peace or stabilization, but preparing for sustained confrontation with NATO and Europe. Section II further argues that NATO's current security architecture, particularly the political and legal ambiguity embedded in Article 5, creates a structural weakness that Moscow systematically exploits to press the boundary of sub-threshold aggression. It therefore asks what structural changes are necessary to restore credible deterrence before continued confrontation escalates into open war. In addition, the project adds longitudinal depth by tracing continuity across multiple generations of Russian strategic development rather than treating post-2014 behavior as a self-contained break. Finally, it broadens the evidentiary base by combining established English-language scholarship with Russian-language primary, doctrinal, legal, investigative, and open-source materials often absent from standard discussions of Russian strategy and hybrid warfare. By "revisionist," this paper refers to Russia's effort to revise the post-Cold War order by reestablishing a recognized sphere of influence, constraining the alignment choices of neighboring states, and challenging the Western, especially U.S.-led, unipolar order.

1.2. Background: Russian Strategic Reframing of War and Security State

In Western discussions of contemporary Russian warfare, few concepts became as entrenched, and as misleading, as the so-called "Gerasimov Doctrine" (Bartles, 2016; Galeotti, 2018). Popularized in 2014-2015, the term was widely interpreted as a new Russian blueprint for hybrid war: a unified design combining information operations, covert military action, cyber capabilities, proxies, and political destabilization. Yet this understanding rests on a category error (Galeotti, 2018). What Western observers labeled a doctrine was in fact the product of internal developments in Russia between 2007 and 2013. These developments included the ideological trajectory established by Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich speech, the Kremlin's interpretation of the Arab Spring and earlier color revolutions, and the profound regime shock generated by the 2011-2012 Bolotnaya protests-large opposition demonstrations in central Moscow. These episodes coalesced into a worldview among Russia's siloviki, shaped by a chekist (KGB-derived) culture, that the West was already waging an undeclared, multidomain campaign aimed at regime change through information flows, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), sanctions, and the mobilization of domestic protest poten-

tial. Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov's 2013 article reflected and reinforced this broader siloviki worldview, articulating how Russia's military establishment understood Western political and strategic conflict in the twenty-first century (Gerasimov, 2013). It marked the first stage in an evolving conceptual trajectory that culminated in Gerasimov's 2019 formulation of "active defense" as Russia's long-term approach to modern war (Gerasimov, 2019).

1.2.1. From Munich to Bolotnaya: The Kremlin's Threat Perception Shift

The ideological foundations of this worldview were clearly articulated in Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference (Putin, 2007). Addressing Western leaders, he denounced a U.S.-led "unipolar" order as unjust and destabilizing, arguing that "today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper-use of force-military force-in international relations" that undermines international law and plunges the world into "permanent conflicts" (Putin, 2007). He further claimed that NATO expansion "does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance... it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust," pointedly asking, "against whom is this expansion intended?" (Putin, 2007). In the same speech, Putin accused the OSCE and Western-supported NGOs of becoming a "vulgar instrument of other states' foreign policy, stressing that these organizations were "formally independent, but purposefully financed and therefore controlled" from abroad (Putin, 2007). This crystallized a narrative of osazhdyonnaya krepost' the "besieged fortress," a worldview portraying Russia as encircled by hostile actors seeking to undermine its sovereignty. That narrative resonated deeply with the chekist mentality inside Russia's security apparatus.

The domestic upheaval of 2011-2012 transformed this ideological posture into an urgent operational concern. The Bolotnaya protests-mass demonstrations against electoral fraud and against Putin's return to the presidency-constituted the largest mobilization in Russia since the early 1990s. For the siloviki, these events were not routine dissent but a direct challenge to regime stability, unfolding amid the Arab Spring, unrest in Europe, and continuing turbulence across the post-Soviet space. Their social composition of urban, educated, middle-class Russians matched the demographic historically viewed by security services as politically volatile. Putin publicly accused U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of "giving them a signal... they heard this signal and, with the support of the U.S. State Department, began active work" (TASS, 2011). In the Kremlin's security discourse, this accusation became a symbolic moment when domestic opposition was increasingly framed not as autonomous dissent, but as a potential vector of hostile foreign influence. Consequently, color revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005), and the Arab Spring uprisings were woven together in the Kremlin's worldview into a coherent narrative of Western political warfare. Hedenskog, Persson, and Vendil Pallin (2016) show how quickly this interpretation was institutionalized. They note that "colour revolutions" were explicitly identified in official security thinking as a core threat, driving an intensified search for enemies "from within and without," while the Kremlin's doctrine asserted that "the survival of the system in its current form is the same as the survival of Russia" (pp. 99-100). In this reframed environment, Bolotnaya marked the point at which regime preservation became synonymous with national defense and domestic protest was reclassified as a

theater of international confrontation. The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) is a 57-state regional security body whose election-monitoring and civil-society programs are often portrayed in Russian official discourse as instruments of foreign political interference.

1.2.2. Gerasimov and the Misreading of Russian Military Doctrine

Against this backdrop, Gerasimov's February 2013 "article," in fact a published transcript of his address to the Russian Academy of Military Sciences (AVN), later reprinted in Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kurier (VPK) under the title "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight," should be understood as a diagnosis of perceived Western strategy rather than a blueprint for Russian aggression (Gerasimov, 2013). Although such speeches are an annual and largely routine venue for the Chief of the General Staff to outline priorities in military science, this was Gerasimov's first address in that role after his appointment in November 2012-a factor that later encouraged Western analysts to misinterpret his remarks as the unveiling of a new Russian doctrine of war. Gerasimov (2013) opened with the now-widely cited assertion that, in modern conflict, "we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template." He further argued that "the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness." Modern conflict, he claimed, increasingly relies on coordinated political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other pressures "applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population." In this framing, Western measures sanctions, information pressure, and civic mobilization-were not alternatives to war but its opening phase. VPK is a Russian defense-industry newspaper closely affiliated with the Ministry of Defence and is commonly used by senior military officials to communicate doctrinal priorities to Russia's professional military and defense-industrial community.

Within Russian security circles, the article was understood as a diagnosis of how the West wages modern interstate confrontation (Bartles, 2016). Western analysts, however, took a sharply different path. The notion of the "Gerasimov Doctrine" did not originate in Russian strategic writings at all, but in a 2014 blog post by Mark Galeotti (Galeotti, 2014). As he later admitted, he coined the label "to [his] immense chagrin." It has since "acquired a destructive life of its own" and was never meant to imply a real doctrine (Galeotti, 2018). Nevertheless, after the annexation of Crimea and the onset of Russian-sponsored conflict in eastern Ukraine, the concept spread rapidly because it offered a seemingly tidy explanation for Russia's multivectored campaign of subversion, disinformation, and covert action. The myth endured precisely because it framed a complex, opportunistic repertoire of state behavior as a single, centrally directed blueprint for hybrid war-even though, as Galeotti emphasized, "there is no single Russian 'doctrine'," only overlapping and sometimes contradictory practices.

This reinterpretation of color revolutions as externally orchestrated regime change did not remain rhetorical. The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014) codified it as a legal threat

model by listing externally supported political mobilization, disruption of governance, and information influence against critical infrastructure as internal military risks. Crucially, the doctrine also expanded the legal definition of war to include the integrated employment of political, economic, informational, and other nonmilitary measures, coordinated with the protest potential of the population (Military Doctrine, 2014). Through this shift, the domestic arena was no longer considered a space insulated from interstate rivalry but the primary battlespace of early confrontation. Regime security became synonymous with national security, and the preservation of political order became the central strategic objective. However, the 2014 doctrine still lacked one essential piece: how Russia would actually fight in this environment of continuous, sub-threshold confrontation and how hybrid measures connected to the feared threat of high-precision aerospace attack. That operational synthesis only emerged in 2019.

1.2.3. MRAU, the Initial Period of War, and Active Defense

From its inception, Soviet military doctrine was understood as a concept composed of two interrelated dimensions. Mikhail Frunze, one of the architects of the Red Army and a theorist of its political subordination to the state, defined doctrine as a system consisting of a political component, which sets the state's objectives and character, and a military-technical component, which determines the organization of the armed forces, force preparation, and methods of combat employment (Frunze, 1921). By the 1960s, technological innovation began to redefine the military-technical component. A force structure originally geared toward protracted, large-scale land operations was now increasingly seen as capable of shaping the outcome of war at its very outset. In the works of Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky, former Chief of the General Staff and editor-in-chief of the seminal volume Military Strategy, victory became less associated with the results of ground operations than with the ability to shape the initial period of war (IPW) through strategic nuclear strikes against the enemy's critical military and command infrastructure (Sokolovskiy, 1963). In the early 1980s, Nikolai Ogarkov, the principal reformer of the late-Soviet armed forces, advanced this logic further. Technological progress, particularly the development of high-precision conventional strike systems and prospective weapons based on new physical principles, opened a pathway to achieving political outcomes without nuclear use (Ogarkov, as cited in Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 1986). By 1983, this two-aspect structure of doctrine received formal codification. The socio-political component was recognized as the most stable, defining the aims and causes of war. The military-technical component, by contrast, was characterized by its dynamism, reflecting technological change and shaping evolving forms, means, and methods of warfare (Military Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1983, as cited in Thomas & Orenstein, 2021).

This foundation produced the perception of massirovannyy raketno-aviatsionnyy udar (Massed Missile-Aviation Strike, MRAU) as an existential threat in which technological action yields immediate political effect. The experience of Operation Desert Storm (1991), demonstrating that a large-scale, high-precision strike could paralyze command and control and air defenses without nuclear weapons, became a pivotal confirmation for Russian military analysis. Strategic outcomes could

be achieved through an MRAU before any large-scale ground operations became necessary. Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine codified this logic by identifying the mass employment of high-precision, strategic non-nuclear strike systems and the "implementation of the Global Strike concept" as among the main external military dangers (Military Doctrine, 2014). In contemporary Russian assessments, such an Integrated Massed Air Strike (IMVU) against critical politico-military centers of gravity is understood as the core threat in the IPW. This strike is specifically designed to paralyze command and control, prevent mobilization, and achieve strategic political outcomes before protracted combat operations can occur (Kofman et al., 2021).

Because the IPW is considered decisive, shaping the conditions under which it begins becomes the central task of strategy. This is the conceptual bridge that connects the late-Soviet fear of a decisive MRAU with Russia's post-2011-2014 re-evaluation of nonmilitary pressures. From Frunze's two-component understanding of doctrine onward, the socio-political dimension had been treated as the stable "political component" that set the aims of war, while the military-technical component determined the means of achieving them. In contemporary Russian thinking, the MRAU and its updated formulation, the IMVU, are no longer understood as isolated opening decapitation strikes but as the culminating phase of a broader confrontation prepared through nonmilitary means. Russian analysts now distinguish a pre-conflict period characterized by nonmilitary pressure, information confrontation, and psychological dislocation, followed by the transition into the IPW. In this schema, this kinetic phase is preceded by attempts to "internally destabilize Russia through nonmilitary means," while informatization and complex reconnaissance-strike "contours" make command and control and critical infrastructure the central objectives of early attack (Kofman et al., 2021). The consequence is that the socio-political domain, including public opinion, protest potential, and information flows, becomes the decisive operational arena that determines whether the state retains the capacity to sustain command and control in the IPW.

In his 2019 address to the Academy of Military Sciences, Gerasimov situated socio-political warfare within a broader evolution of military thought. This progression spans from annihilation and attrition to global war, nuclear deterrence, and strategies based on indirect action (Gerasimov, 2019). He argued that Washington and its allies use color revolutions, soft power, and the activation of protest potential to undermine sovereignty and replace legally constituted authorities, citing Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine as primary examples. In effect, what Soviet doctrine once considered the political precondition for war is reconceived as its opening operational phase.

Russia's response is the institutionalization of preemption under the label of active defense. Gerasimov defined it as a set of measures for the preemptive neutralization of threats to state security (Gerasimov, 2019). In this framework, the emergence of new spheres of confrontation expands the range of instruments integrated into conflict. Information warfare, political influence, legal and economic coercion, and covert operations are treated as tools for shaping the IPW. Most notably, Gerasimov argued that the information sphere has become a key battlespace into which future warfare will increasingly shift (Gerasimov, 2019). He treated information technologies as especially

consequential because the information space has no clear national borders and permits remote, covert effects against both critical infrastructure and the population itself, thereby directly influencing national security. In light of Russian assessments of MRAU and IMVU threats, active defense rests on a core proposition. Because a decisive aerospace strike is expected to follow a period of socio-political destabilization, the socio-political domain becomes the primary object of preemptive action.

Two senior strategists at the apex of Russia's military thought, General-Lieutenant Vladimir I. Ostankov, a leading researcher at the Military Academy of the General Staff (VAGSh), and General-Colonel Vladimir B. Zarudnitskiy, former Commander of the Central Military District and now Chief of the General Staff's Military Academy, translate the logic of Active Defense into the concrete structure of future war. Ostankov frames the principal task of strategy as forecasting the character of upcoming conflicts and adapting the employment of the Armed Forces accordingly. He maintains that contemporary conflicts are defined by the integrated use of political, economic, informational, and other nonmilitary pressures. These include the activation of protest potential and support for opposition forces, reinforced by covert military measures, special operations, and proxy formations. Crucially, he argues that the decisive role of armed struggle persists, necessitating a shift from isolated service-level operations to integrated joint groupings capable of conducting strategic operations in a theater of war under unified command (Ostankov, 2019). In this formulation, nonmilitary pressure constitutes the preparatory operational layer that enables rapid, deep, largely non-contact strikes by joint forces once the threshold into the IPW is crossed.

Zarudnitskiy develops this into a medium-term forecast of how such conflicts are likely to unfold. He identifies several converging trends that push confrontation toward a global, multi-spheric character. These include the growing role of nonmilitary measures and large-scale information-psychological campaigns, including research into what he calls "behavioral-type" warfare. He also points to the extension of conflict into the space and information domains, as well as the proliferation of unmanned, high-precision, and autonomous systems. In his vision, future "multi-sphere" operations will integrate global strikes by unmanned precision weapons and software-hardware effects with simultaneous information-psychological and special operations (Zarudnitskiy, 2021). Their aim is the functional defeat of the adversary's command and control and critical infrastructure rather than its physical destruction. Countering these dynamics, he argues, requires coordinated action by all state instruments within an active defense posture, oriented toward preemptively neutralizing threats and seizing the strategic initiative early.

Taken together, Ostankov operationalizes the opening phase of confrontation, while Zarudnitskiy institutionalizes its multi-spheric architecture. Both embed active defense within capability development and strategic planning. Socio-political destabilization, information confrontation, and functional disruption are not ancillary tools but the structuring logic of the IPW, which Russian strategy must anticipate and preempt long before missiles enter the battlespace. For a more in-depth analysis of Russian military strategy, active defense, and associated operational concepts, see Kofman et al.

(2021).

In contemporary Russian military thought, active defense consolidates a single, integrated threat model. The MRAU/IMVU remains the principal military danger the specific scenario in which Russia's strategic viability could be extinguished within the IPW. But such a strike is assessed as effective only after the adversary has already eroded Russia's political resilience. Nonmilitary pressures, including sanctions, information influence, elite fragmentation, and protest mobilization, are therefore understood as the normal pathway by which the West prepares the battlespace for attack. These measures are not viewed as separate from interstate conflict, but as the preferred Western method of regime elimination through the erosion of societal cohesion.

Russian hybrid operations against EU and NATO members, including cyber sabotage, energy coercion, election interference, targeted corruption, information-psychological disruption, and the cultivation of anti-establishment sentiment, ensure that, when a crisis erupts, Europe is unable to act collectively or rapidly enough to operationalize Article 5. This is the operational heart of Russia's escalation: maintaining continuous pressure so that the Alliance's legal guarantees remain intact, but its decision-making coherence and political will do not. These campaigns are not conducted by diplomats or theorists. They are executed by the siloviki, the ruling security apparatus whose worldview placed Russia on a permanent war footing. MRAU-Russian doctrinal term "массированный ракетно-авиационный удар," typically translated in Western literature as "Massed Missile-Aviation Strike." It denotes the integrated employment of large-scale missile and air strike assets against critical command, control, and state governance targets at the opening of war.

1.3. The Siloviki State and the Operationalization of Confrontation

To analyze how this elite operationalizes confrontation, it is necessary to disaggregate the institutions that comprise the group. Derived from silovye struktury ("power ministries"), the term denotes current and former officers of the KGB and its successor agencies, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), as well as personnel of the armed forces, including the Main Directorate of the General Staff (GU, formerly GRU), the Interior Ministry, the National Guard, and affiliated coercive organizations. Unlike ordinary bureaucratic actors, the siloviki constitute an integrated ruling stratum. They control the state's principal instruments of coercion and intelligence, dominate the upper tiers of federal and regional administration, and occupy commanding positions across state corporations and strategic sectors of the economy. Their collective background in security organs has produced a distinctive governing logic in which the protection of state power, regime continuity, and the management of internal threats are treated as inseparable from foreign-policy behavior. Although Russia maintains the external architecture of a constitutional order, including courts that issue judgments, a legislature that passes laws, and parties that compete in elections, these institutions increasingly operate as procedural extensions of a system in which coercive-service veterans hold the effective monopoly over agenda-setting, decision-making, and enforcement. As a result, contemporary Russian governance cannot be understood

solely through its formal constitutional design. It is structured by the ascendancy of a security elite whose organizational culture, threat perceptions, and institutional interests shape both domestic authoritarian consolidation and the conception and practice of hybrid warfare.

1.3.1. Putin's rise and security-state consolidation

Putin did not enter the national stage as a dominant political figure, but as a compromise candidate produced by elite bargaining. As the designated successor to Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, he emerged amid a mounting succession and security crisis in the late 1990s. After the tightly managed yet formally competitive 1996 election, Yeltsin entered his second term gravely ill, presiding over a fragmented political field and a state weakened by the first Chechen war and the 1998 financial crash. These shocks consolidated into what Kremlin insiders called the "problem of 2000." Yeltsin's mandate was running out, his popularity had collapsed, and his entourage feared both a potential Communist return and criminal prosecution for large-scale corruption and the "loans-for-shares" privatization scheme of the 1990s (Mikhailov, 2024).

Within this context, security-service professionals appeared increasingly attractive as guarantors of continuity. Putin, a mid-level KGB officer who moved from St. Petersburg into the Kremlin bureaucracy, distinguished himself less by public prominence than by bureaucratic reliability and unquestionable loyalty to his superiors. Between 1998 and 1999, he advanced rapidly from deputy head of the presidential administration to FSB director and then to secretary of the Security Council. In August 1999, Yeltsin appointed Putin prime minister while publicly presenting him as his preferred successor (Mikhailov, 2024).

Within weeks, a series of apartment bombings in Russian cities, followed by the launch of the second Chechen war, created an atmosphere of fear, panic, and militarized patriotism. Public demand for a "strong hand" surged, allowing Putin to cultivate the image of a decisive strongman who would restore order (Mikhailov, 2024). While definitive attribution for the 1999 bombings remains contested, the crisis is central to understanding the political conditions under which Putin consolidated authority. The broader academic literature emphasizes that the attacks generated a sharp public demand for a decisive security response and unprecedented national attention to the previously unknown prime minister. His approval ratings surged as he fronted a new war and filled the vacuum left by an increasingly absent Yeltsin. On December 31, 1999, Yeltsin resigned and transferred the acting presidency to Putin. This sequence has been widely interpreted as a political bargain in which Yeltsin secured personal safety by elevating a loyal security-service insider.

Putin and his circle rapidly began replacing alternative elites in the Presidential Administration, state corporations, and regional governments. Although Russia still contained several autonomous centers of influence, these actors were gradually co-opted, marginalized, or coerced into the emerging power vertical. At the same time, the color revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) were interpreted by Russian security elites as externally orchestrated regime-change

operations, reinforcing suspicions that similar pressure could eventually be directed against Russia. The mass protests of 2011-2012 brought that logic into the domestic sphere, recasting dissent as a component of hostile geopolitical strategy.

These shocks reinforced the same institutional pattern. The mandates of the FSB and other power ministries expanded, reliance on informal coercion deepened, and trusted security-service veterans were systematically placed into commanding roles across ministries, regional administrations, state corporations, and strategic sectors of the economy. By the early 2010s, this cumulative process had transformed the siloviki from one influential faction among several into the regime's central organizing principle. They defined threats, set priorities, and monopolized the instruments of coercion and intelligence at home and abroad. In this configuration, domestic regime security and external confrontation were treated as mutually reinforcing components of a single, permanent struggle.

1.3.2. Institutional Architecture of Hybrid Confrontation

It is therefore necessary to disaggregate the siloviki into their principal institutional components. The following section maps the core agencies that constitute Russia's contemporary security architecture, the FSB, the SVR, the GU, and the Security Council, examining their formal mandates, leadership structures, jurisdictions, and patterns of coordination. This institutional anatomy establishes the structural baseline for analyzing how this security elite governs, competes internally, and operationalizes hybrid warfare in subsequent chapters.

The Federal Security Service. The Federal Security Service, or FSB, is Russia's primary domestic security service and the principal institutional successor to the Soviet KGB's internal directorates. It consolidates intelligence, counterintelligence, and coercive law-enforcement functions within a single organization that reports directly to the president. Its authority expanded further under Putin, including through legal changes that broadened the basis for surveillance, organizational control, and preemptive intervention against perceived threats to state security (Russian Federation, 2002).

Within the post-Soviet siloviki system, state power was intentionally distributed across agencies with overlapping mandates. In practice, this arrangement has allowed the presidency to arbitrate jurisdictional competition while enabling the FSB to accumulate disproportionate influence relative to other coercive and intelligence institutions. This influence operates across the entire security and law-enforcement apparatus rather than within the FSB alone. The service systematically gathers compromising material on officials in parallel agencies, exercises de facto control over senior appointments through mandatory security vetting, and embeds serving or former FSB officers in leadership positions across other siloviki institutions. In these roles, such officers function as internal overseers capable of independently constraining, disciplining, or redirecting organizational behavior outside formal chains of command (Dossier Center, n.d.-b).

Although formally a domestic security service, the FSB has long exercised sustained authority beyond Russia's borders in the so-called "near abroad," the post-Soviet states that Russian doctrine treats as a privileged sphere of influence (Dossier Center, n.d.-a). It has done so primarily through counterterrorism cooperation frameworks that provided a legal and institutional basis for sustained external presence. This arrangement effectively collapses domestic territory and the post-Soviet space into a single regime-protection zone.

The Foreign Intelligence Service. The Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR, is Russia's primary civilian foreign-intelligence agency. It is responsible for collecting political, economic, scientific, and technological intelligence abroad and for maintaining an extensive global human-intelligence network. Formally established in December 1991 as the successor to the KGB's First Chief Directorate, the SVR preserved Soviet-era personnel, tradecraft, and corporate culture (Bowen, 2025).

Unlike the FSB, the SVR lacks investigative authority and domestic coercive powers. Its institutional role centers on elite access, long-term intelligence penetration, and strategic assessment rather than enforcement or repression. Beyond intelligence collection, its influence activity is primarily elite-oriented, targeting foreign policymakers, experts, and corporate actors by offering alternative strategic narratives and selectively framed economic opportunities.

While historically focused on traditional human intelligence, the SVR also possesses cyber, disinformation, and influence capabilities, with U.S. authorities attributing the 2021 SolarWinds intrusion to SVR-linked cyber units (Bowen, 2025). Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the mass expulsion of intelligence officers from Western embassies, the SVR's operational posture became more overt and assertive, accompanied by expanded public messaging and intensified activity targeting Russian expatriate communities (Dossier Center, n.d.-a). Despite its formal separation from domestic repression, the SVR operates within a highly centralized security system in which strategic priorities, tasking, and institutional protection are determined by the Kremlin. As a result, the service functions within a regime-centric intelligence hierarchy rather than as an autonomous foreign-intelligence institution.

The Main Directorate. The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, or GU, commonly known by its Soviet-era name GRU, is Russia's military intelligence service. Unlike Russia's other siloviki services, it is not an independent federal agency. Instead, it is formally subordinate to the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff and reports primarily through the military chain of command rather than through direct, institutionalized access to the president (Bowen, 2021). As part of the armed forces, the GU is responsible for all levels of military intelligence, from tactical battlefield reconnaissance to strategic assessment. Its functions include recruiting and running human intelligence sources, collecting signals, electronic, and satellite intelligence, commanding spetsnaz tasked with reconnaissance and sabotage, training

and supervising proxy and auxiliary forces, and supporting military planning and operations abroad (Bowen, 2021). Unlike Russia's civilian intelligence services, the GU is designed to fuse intelligence collection with direct military action, making it the state's primary instrument for sabotage and covert force abroad.

This structure gives the GU broad operational responsibilities but limited political autonomy. It lacks its own internal security service and operates under the oversight of the FSB's military counterintelligence. While this oversight does not amount to formal control over appointments, it creates sustained opportunities for influence through recruitment screening, personnel monitoring, and informal pressure. Competing security institutions thus can divert promising officers, shape leadership outcomes, and constrain the GU's institutional autonomy.

The Security Council. The Security Council of the Russian Federation (SB; Sovet bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii, hereafter Sovbez) functions as the Kremlin's central mechanism for coordinating Russia's intelligence, military, and internal security apparatus. Formally, it is a constitutional advisory body tasked with preparing presidential decisions on national security, defense, and the protection of the constitutional order (Galeotti, 2019b). In practice, however, Sovbez derives its influence less from plenary meetings than from its permanent secretariat, which consolidates intelligence reporting, drafts strategic documents, and issues inter-agency tasking on the president's behalf (Bowen, 2025; Galeotti, 2019b). Rather than operating as a collective decision-making forum, it serves as an administrative mechanism that translates presidential priorities into coordinated action across the security apparatus (Galeotti, 2019b).

This role is central to Putin's personalist system, in which authority is concentrated around the presidency and policy is shaped through narrow access and managed information flows rather than institutionalized checks (Bowen, 2025). Sovbez provides the infrastructure through which the Kremlin center and the Presidential Administration convert a shared threat worldview into operational priorities and synchronized activity among the major services, including the FSB, the SVR, and the GU (Greene et al., 2025). Agencies compete for influence by aligning assessments with what they believe the president expects to hear (Galeotti, 2019a). Under longtime secretary Nikolai Patrushev (2008-2024), Sovbez also acquired a pronounced ideological function. It framed Russia's security environment as one of permanent confrontation with the West and treated internal regime security as inseparable from external threat management (Galeotti, 2019b). As Greene et al. (2025) note, this worldview frequently collapses the distinction between national security and regime survival: domestic dissent is interpreted as foreign subversion, while external pressure is treated as an instrument of regime change.

Beyond its formal coordinating role, Sovbez also served as the institutional locus of Vladimir Putin's inner decision-making circle. Although the Council as a whole included a broader set of officials, agenda-setting power resided in a narrow subset whose authority derived from personal access and

presidential trust rather than from the institution itself. Prior to 2022, this inner circle functioned as a relatively stable collective, shaped by shared security-service backgrounds and a common worldview marked by suspicion, zero-sum reasoning, and revanchist interpretations of Russia's post-Cold War position (Galeotti, 2019a). Over time, however, as access to Putin narrowed, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, information flows became increasingly concentrated and less exposed to corrective feedback. Inter-agency competition further distorted reporting, as agencies tailored assessments to perceived presidential preferences rather than empirical conditions. A critical example was the FSB's role in feeding the Kremlin optimistic assessments that Ukrainians would offer limited resistance and that political control could be established quickly. These assumptions underpinned planning for a rapid decapitation-style campaign and contributed to early operational miscalculations (Miller & Belton, 2022). Following the failure of the initial phase of the 2022 invasion, this model of collective influence fractured.

1.3.3. Wagner Group Rebellion

The June 2023 mutiny by the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company operating with state approval but outside the formal military chain of command, constituted the most serious threat to Vladimir Putin's regime since he came to power. The episode exposed the failure of the Kremlin's long-standing strategy of permitting rivalry within the security sector. Tensions between Wagner and the Ministry of Defense were not accidental; they were tolerated because they served a political purpose. Responsibility for battlefield failures could be displaced onto feuding subordinates, public frustration could be absorbed by visible elite conflict, and the presidency could remain insulated from direct blame. This system depended on the assumption that such conflicts would remain controllable and subject to presidential arbitration. That assumption collapsed when Wagner units seized military facilities in southern Russia and advanced hundreds of kilometers toward Moscow without encountering meaningful resistance from the armed forces or internal security services. In response, the regime concentrated control more tightly around the presidency and further strengthened the FSB as the principal counterintelligence overseer of the armed forces and military intelligence. The Wagner episode thus exposed the limits of managed competition as a governing mechanism and confirmed that, when confronted with systemic failure, the regime responds by concentrating control around the presidency rather than strengthening institutions.

2. Conclusion

Russia's current confrontation with the West is neither episodic nor improvised. It is a sustained strategic project rooted in a wartime understanding of politics and a regime-security worldview that collapses the boundary between internal stability and national defense. Through the institutionalization of active defense, the Kremlin now treats nonmilitary pressure as the opening phase of war itself rather than as competition short of conflict. In this framework, the preservation of the current political system becomes synonymous with national security, placing the Russian state on a footing

of permanent, multispheric struggle.

This system operates according to a narrative-driven regime-security logic in which disruption itself can constitute success. Operations do not need to produce concrete strategic gains to be rewarded because disruption, exposure, and even failure are frequently reframed as evidence of professional initiative, relevance, and loyalty to the regime. This incentive structure weakens corrective feedback and makes restraint professionally irrational, ensuring that the security apparatus continues to push the boundaries of coercion by default. Absent a credible external constraint, the siloviki system has no clear internal stopping point and will continue to intensify pressure until confrontation crosses into open war.

The efficacy of this revisionist strategy also depends on the structural characteristics of the security environment it confronts. Moscow's hybrid operations are specifically calculated to exploit the political and legal ambiguities within the European security architecture that hinder a collective response. By maintaining continuous pressure just below the threshold of conventional war, the Kremlin seeks to exhaust adversary defenses and ensure that legal guarantees like Article 5 remain politically unusable. This mismatch in threat perception allows Russia to systematically press the boundaries of aggression while paralyzing collective Western decision-making. Section II therefore turns to the structural weaknesses and institutional gaps that Moscow exploits. It examines how this confrontational model manifests in concrete cases across Europe and considers what changes are necessary to restore credible deterrence before continued escalation produces a wider conflict.

N.B.: All references are compiled together in part II of this article at page 101

No Peace, No Illusion (Part II): Europe's Security Weaknesses

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1. Europe's Security Weaknesses with Respect to Russia

At the center of Europe's security architecture lies Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the clause that defines the Alliance's collective defense commitment. Article 5 states that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1949). Yet the treaty deliberately avoids mandating an automatic or uniform response. Instead, each Ally commits to take "such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1949). Collective defense is therefore not a mechanical trigger but a political process grounded in consensus and national discretion. In a 32-member alliance such as NATO, this flexibility serves an important purpose: it preserves cohesion across states with divergent strategic cultures, domestic constraints, and threat perceptions. At the same time, that same discretion constitutes the Alliance's most significant structural vulnerability. The treaty imposes only an individual obligation on each state, leaving the form, scope, and intensity of assistance to national discretion even when Allies agree that a threat exists. Responses may range from diplomatic and economic measures to military force. In practice, ambiguous or hybrid incidents do not reach Article 5 at all. Instead, they are absorbed into consultations under Article 4, where Allies can assess the incident collectively without committing the Alliance to a formal collective-defense response (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024, 2025a).

This institutional ambiguity has historically been effective against overt, attributable aggression. It is far less effective against deniable, incremental pressure deliberately designed to remain below clear legal thresholds. This project argues that Russia's long-term confrontation strategy is structured around exploiting precisely this gap. Hybrid operations cyber sabotage, election interference, infrastructure disruption, energy coercion, information-psychological campaigns, and calibrated military incidents are not intended to trigger Article 5 outright. They are designed to impose cumulative strategic costs while forcing NATO into reactive, politically contested decision-making. Each individual incident may appear insufficient to justify collective defense; taken together, they erode deterrence by normalizing escalation without consequence. The problem, however, is not only one of ambiguity. Europe also confronts an adversary that is reorganizing its economy, industrial base, and force posture for prolonged confrontation. Any assessment of European security weakness must therefore account not only for NATO's difficulty responding to sub-threshold coercion, but also for Russia's growing capacity to sustain and regenerate pressure over time.

2. Analysis: How Russia Exploits Article 5 Ambiguity

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian hybrid activity has evolved from sporadic disruption into a sustained campaign spanning sabotage, targeted violence, cyber-physical attacks, disinformation, and weaponized migration. These forms of pressure impose costs, sow fear, and remain below the threshold most likely to trigger a unified NATO response (Bajarūnas, 2025; McGrath, 2024). They are carried out through the same system examined in the previous chapter, with the armed forces driving overt provocations, the intelligence services directing covert action, and the Security Council coordinating the broader campaign.

As Figures 1 and 2 show, Russian hybrid activity across Europe has become broader, more frequent, and more dangerous since 2022. Between February 2022 and November 2024, nearly 150 suspected or attributed operations were identified in NATO territory alone (McGrath, 2024). Other assessments found that attacks in Europe nearly tripled between 2023 and 2024 after quadrupling between 2022 and 2023, including a 246 percent increase in confirmed attacks on critical infrastructure (Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025; Jones, 2025). These figures likely understate the true scale of the campaign because the deniable character of hybrid operations makes comprehensive attribution difficult (McGrath, 2024). The sections that follow examine the principal forms of this pressure.

2.1. Military Provocations

The most overt dimension of Russia's long-term confrontation strategy is the systematic use of calibrated military provocations against NATO territory, airspace, and maritime approaches. These incidents fall short of open war, but they are too repeated, too coherent, and too politically consequential to be treated as isolated accidents. Their purpose is not simply to test allied thresholds,

Map 0.1: **Methods of Russian hybrid-warfare activity across Europe, January 2018–June 2025**

Figure 1: Methods of Russian Hybrid-Warfare Activity Across Europe, January 2018-June 2025
Note. Map illustrating targets of sabotage, assassination, GPS jamming, and other hybrid attacks across European nations.

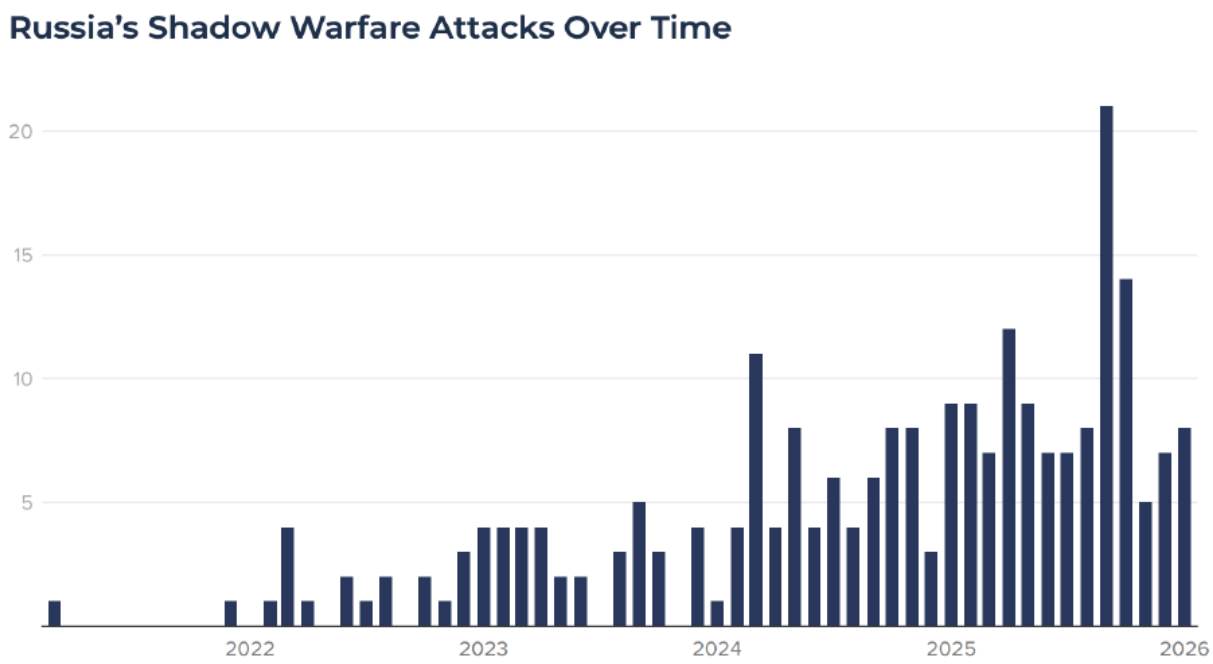

Figure 2: Russia's Shadow Warfare Attacks Over Time (2022-2026)
Note. Chart illustrating the increase in shadow warfare attacks from 2022 to 2026. From War without end: Deterring Russia's shadow war, by S. Greene et al. (2026).

but to steadily erode them by normalizing direct military pressure below the point likely to trigger a stronger collective response. Each limited provocation pushes the line further, training the Alliance to absorb escalation through consultation, caution, and delay. The danger is that these violations will become routine. If repeated violations become politically manageable, NATO may respond to a more serious incident not as a strategic rupture but as one more episode in a pattern it has already been conditioned to tolerate. September 2025 offers a particularly useful lens for this process because it compressed several such incidents into a short period and exposed the cumulative logic of the campaign.

2.1.1. Case I

The September 9, 2025, drone incursion into Poland represents Russia's most direct test of NATO collective defense since the Cold War. During a broader strike against Ukraine, nineteen Gerbera drones, Russian-produced variants derived from Iranian design, were launched from Russian territory, with some crossing Belarus before entering NATO airspace. According to the evidence assembled for this section, the drones were modified with additional fuel tanks to extend their operational range to approximately 600 to 700 kilometers. These units were also equipped with Controlled Reception Pattern Antennas for resilient satellite navigation and utilized 4G modems with local SIM cards to maintain command links through Polish and Lithuanian networks (Khomenko, 2025; Brown, 2025). Investigations further indicated that these communications links had been tested in

preceding months, suggesting preparation rather than battlefield spillover. As Figure 3 illustrates, the geographic distribution of the debris confirms that Russian assets penetrated hundreds of kilometers into the Polish interior, reaching deep into central Poland and the strategic logistics hub of Rzeszów (Institute for the Study of War, 2025). The assault unfolded in organized waves, two to three sorties of two to seven drones each, making it qualitatively different from earlier isolated intrusions that could plausibly be attributed to jamming, spoofing, or technical malfunction. Polish authorities reported that only four drones were shot down, while the remainder crashed after entering Polish airspace. Airports in Warsaw, Lublin, and Rzeszów were temporarily disrupted, the last of these being NATO's principal logistics hub for supplying Ukraine. Allied aircraft and support systems were activated in response, including Polish F-16s, Dutch F-35s, Italian AWACS, NATO tankers, and German Patriot batteries. Poland subsequently invoked Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025a). This represented the eighth use of the consultative clause in the history of the Alliance and the first such instance since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025a).

By deploying Gerbera drones instead of the armed Geran-1 and Geran-2 strike drones, Russia's domestically produced versions of the Iranian Shahed-131 and Shahed-136, Moscow sought to control escalation. The Geran-2 carries approximately 40 kilograms of explosives, roughly three times the destructive power of a standard NATO 155mm artillery shell (Institute for the Study of War, 2022). Gerbera units, by contrast, can carry only small warheads and in practice primarily serve as decoys and reconnaissance platforms, with strike functions usually assigned to the Geran family. The drones that crossed into Poland reportedly carried no meaningful destructive payload; their purpose was political rather than kinetic. They demonstrated reach, technical preparation, and intent while reducing the immediate likelihood of mass casualties that would have placed greater pressure on NATO to escalate. As Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski put it, the drones were "all duds," making the signal especially clear: Russia was testing whether the Alliance would treat the incursion as a red line or absorb it as another limited provocation (The Guardian, 2025).

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Shahed drones and even cruise missiles have occasionally crossed regional borders into NATO members such as Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, as well as non-NATO Moldova. In some cases, this appears to have occurred as Russian strikes sought to skirt Ukrainian air defenses; in others, the incursions were attributed to accidents or electronic interference (Bigg, 2025). September 9, however, was qualitatively different. The response that followed, including Operation Eastern Sentry the forward movement of European air, ground, and naval assets to the eastern flank-showed that the incident was taken seriously. At the same time, it exposed differences within the Alliance over how such actions should be interpreted. For Moscow, those divisions are part of the strategic utility of the provocation itself.

Figure 3: Reported Russian Drone Debris in Poland, September 10, 2025
Note. Data from Institute for the Study of War (2025).

2.1.2. Case II

A second key case followed on September 19, 2025. Three Russian MiG-31 fighter aircraft en route from the St. Petersburg region to Kaliningrad departed from the normal route over international waters and violated NATO airspace for more than twelve minutes near Tallinn, the Estonian capital (Sytas & Slattery, 2025). This occurred only days after the September 9 drone incursion, at a moment when regional alertness was already high. According to Estonia and the subsequent discussion at the UN Security Council, the aircraft had not filed a flight plan and were flying with their transponders off (Sytas & Slattery, 2025). After being intercepted by two Italian F-35s operating under NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission from Ämari Air Base, the Russian pilots acknowledged but disregarded radio communications before ultimately being escorted back toward international airspace. The aircraft were armed with R-33 air-to-air missiles, and Estonia responded by invoking Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty. As Figure 4 shows, the flight path released by the Estonian Defence Forces reinforces that this was not a case of aircraft merely skirting allied airspace, but of a deliberate penetration into it.

From an escalation perspective, this case differed fundamentally from the earlier drone incursions. Unlike a drone, a manned aircraft is much harder to dismiss as the product of jamming, spoofing, or navigational error. That is especially true for the MiG-31, a distinctive platform flown only by Russia, which makes attribution straightforward and leaves far less room for ambiguity. The incident also carried a higher level of risk. A MiG-31 is a valuable military asset, and because it carries a crew, its loss would pose a far greater escalation danger than the destruction of an unmanned system. In that sense, the episode signaled that Moscow was prepared to risk its own pilots in order to make military coercion more overt.

The type of aircraft involved also matters. This was not a MiG-31K, the strike-modified variant designed to carry the Kh-47M2 Kinzhal air-launched ballistic missile. These were interceptor MiG-31BM variants armed with R-33 air-to-air missiles. That distinction is significant. Just as Russia used Gerbera drones rather than more destructive Geran strike drones in the Polish case, here it appears to have used interceptor aircraft rather than a dedicated ground-attack platform. A MiG-31BM threatens primarily air targets in its vicinity, not infrastructure or other targets on the ground. Had the aircraft been MiG-31Ks carrying Kinzhals, the incident would have carried a very different escalatory meaning. By choosing interceptors, Russia could make the incursion more overt without making it look like the opening phase of an imminent ground strike.

Another factor suggesting deliberate escalation was the nature of the intercept. Although the MiG-31 is one of the fastest interceptors still in service anywhere in the world, the Russian aircraft did not attempt to evade NATO fighters or break contact. Had the pilots wanted to make interception difficult, they could have dashed across allied airspace and exited before NATO fighters were properly in position. The MiG-31's speed and high service ceiling would have allowed a far more evasive flight profile. Instead, by remaining inside Estonian airspace for roughly twelve minutes while covering only around one hundred kilometers, the aircraft appear to have flown slowly enough to facilitate

interception rather than avoid it.

At the same time, the violation served no real operational necessity. Aircraft flying from Russia proper to Kaliningrad do not need to enter Estonian airspace to threaten Tallinn or other regional targets. Given the standoff range of Russian systems, any strike role could have been performed without crossing into NATO airspace at all. The incursion was therefore a blatant test of NATO resolve, designed to push the red line even further after the earlier drone incidents. More broadly, it showed how Russia can escalate from semi-deniable unmanned incursions to crewed military violations while still remaining below the formal threshold of war.

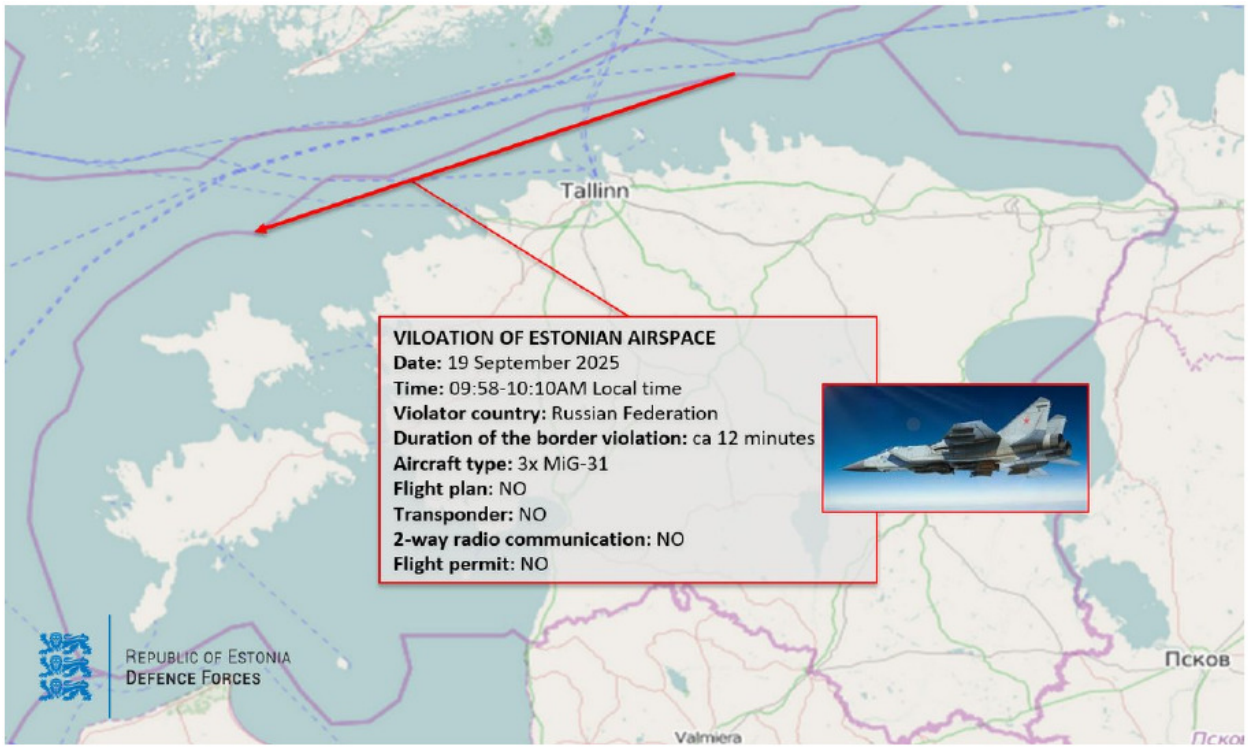

Figure 4: Flight Path of Russian Aircraft During the Estonian Airspace Violation, September 19, 2025

Note. From Ministry of Defence of Estonia (2025).

These cases, together with the broader pattern captured in Table 1, show the scale of military pressure Russia was able to generate across Europe in just one month. Although several of the drone incidents were not formally attributed to a specific actor, the available evidence strongly suggests Russian involvement. That assessment rests on the incidents' timing, target selection, operational profile, and the concurrent presence of Russian-linked vessels in the Danish Straits.

The timing made that pattern especially revealing. These incidents unfolded in rapid succession during Zapad-2025, the large-scale Russian-Belarusian military exercise long associated with offensive

scenarios and escalatory signaling. Each limited incident pushed the line further, conditioned the Alliance to absorb direct military pressure, and made future violations easier to treat as manageable rather than exceptional. The broader significance of September 2025 lies in how clearly it exposed the logic of Russian escalation: to normalize progressively sharper coercion so that, when a more serious confrontation comes, hesitation and delay will already have become NATO's political habit.

2.2. Maritime Sabotage

A second front involves the sabotage of critical maritime infrastructure. Since 2022, the Baltic Sea has become a primary theater of this competition, a development reinforced by Finland's and Sweden's accession to the alliance in 2023 and 2024. Power interconnectors, telecommunications cables, and gas pipelines run through narrow, heavily trafficked maritime corridors linking the Nordic and Baltic states to Germany and the wider European market, often through areas beyond any single state's territorial jurisdiction. Among these assets, undersea cables are especially significant. They carry roughly 95 percent of global data flows and support an estimated $10 trillion in daily financial transactions, yet remain highly vulnerable because of their physical exposure, broad attack surface, and limited redundancy (Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025). The result is a theater in which relatively unsophisticated acts of sabotage can generate significant economic and political effects. Incidents in or near international waters are often difficult to attribute and even harder to convert into meaningful punishment or collective response.

This environment has elevated the strategic role of Russia's shadow fleet. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the imposition of Western sanctions on Russian hydrocarbons, Russia has increasingly relied on this loosely connected network of vessels for its global energy exports. Operating through obscure ownership structures and permissive flags of convenience, the shadow fleet also provides civilian cover and maritime access in contested spaces. That makes it useful not only for sanctions evasion, but also for intelligence collection, seabed reconnaissance, and sabotage-related activity. Some of the most disruptive recent incidents have involved anchor-dragging by these vessels as they moved to and from Russian ports such as Primorsk and Ust-Luga (Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025). This tactic allows critical infrastructure to be damaged under the appearance of a navigational accident while leaving affected states with only limited ability to enforce responsibility directly in international waters (Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025). Even a single severed cable or damaged pipeline can generate tens of millions of euros in repair costs, in addition to lost capacity, emergency surveillance, policing, and the broader burden of defending the maritime domain (Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025).

2.2.1. Cases

A major example came in December 2024, when the Estlink 2 undersea power cable between Finland and Estonia was severed and four data cables were also damaged. Finnish authorities detained the Eagle S, a tanker linked to Russia's shadow fleet, after investigators found anchor-drag scars

Table 1: Timeline of airspace and maritime incidents.

Date	Location	Asset Type	Incident
September 8	Estonia	Mi-8 helicopter	4 min airspace breach
September 9-10	Poland	19-24 Gerbera Drones	7 hour breach; multiple airports closed; Article 4 invoked
September 13	Romania	Geran Drone	50 min airspace breach
September 18	Latvia	Gerbera Drone Fragments	Security alerts raised
September 19	Estonia	3 MiG-31BMs	12 min airspace breach; transponders off; no contact; no flight path; Article 4 invoked; UN Security Council meeting
September 19	Baltic Sea	2 Fighter Jets	Petrobaltic platform safety-zone violation (150 m)
September 21	South Baltic	Il-20M Plane	Intercepted in international airspace; transponder off; no flight plan; no radio contact
Late September	Danish Straits	Warships	Radar/weapon locks; sonar; weapon-aiming; collision courses; GPS jamming
September 22	Denmark and Norway	Several Large Drones	Copenhagen and Oslo airports closed; probable maritime vessel launch
September 24	Denmark	Several Drones	Multiple airports closed
September 25-26	Denmark and Germany	Several Large Drones (Eight Meters)	Mother drone; industrial and power plant surveillance; Kiel Canal; air base surveillance
September 27-28	Norway	Several Drones	NATO hub surveillance; airport closed

on the seabed and concluded that the vessel had dragged its anchor across roughly 90 to 100 kilometers. Finland then pursued a prosecution effort against key officers of the vessel for aggravated sabotage and aggravated interference with telecommunications (Greene et al., 2026). Although the court identified the ship as the technical cause of the disruption, it did not impose criminal liability. It held that the damage was not severe enough to justify such charges, that intentionality could not be proved, and that Finland lacked jurisdiction in international waters (Greene et al., 2026). Nor was the incident isolated. Just a month earlier, the Chinese-flagged Yi Peng 3, reportedly captained by a Russian and carrying Russian fertilizer, had been linked to two cable cuts. The first was between Lithuania and Sweden. The second, on the following day, was between Finland and Germany (Beznosiuk & Dixon, 2026; IISS, 2025).

These incidents reflect the codification of a broader Russian approach to maritime warfare. The 2022 Maritime Doctrine codifies the military and intelligence utility of commercial shipping by integrating civilian fleets into a unified "Maritime Potential" (Russian Federation, 2022, sec. I, para. 4.7). It further establishes a legal basis for the pre-equipping of merchant and fishing vessels for rapid transition to naval service (Russian Federation, 2022, para. 85.5). Most notably, it codifies the use of transport and specialized vessels for "special operations in conditions of peace," effectively blurring the legal distinction between commercial activity and state-sanctioned irregular warfare (Russian Federation, 2022, paras. 85.9-85.10). Reporting on Russian intelligence activity suggests that this framework is not merely theoretical. Dossier Center links the use of commercial platforms to GRU functions such as signal interception and covert operations. In this model, civilian crews can be supplemented by intelligence officers or recruited agents, allowing Russia to maintain a deniable presence in contested waters (Dossier Center, n.d.-d). Such operations may also involve the temporary installation of specialized equipment on civilian vessels. This can include hyperbaric chambers, radio-electronic intelligence systems, electronic-warfare hardware, and other instruments used to collect hydrographic and environmental data relevant to underwater operations, including salinity, temperature, and water depth (Dossier Center, n.d.-d; Greene et al., 2026). They may also involve anchoring devices used as trawls against an adversary's underwater communications and infrastructure (Dossier Center, n.d.-d).

After the Eagle S incident, NATO expanded patrols and surveillance under Operation Baltic Sentry, integrating naval groups, maritime patrol aircraft, drones, and remote-sensing capabilities to strengthen awareness and deterrence by presence (Greene et al., 2026). Yet the operation remained fundamentally reactive, improving resilience without imposing sufficient costs to alter Russian behavior (Greene et al., 2026). This reflects the "resilience dilemma" identified by Greene et al. (2026): hardening undersea infrastructure, building redundancy, and improving recovery may reduce immediate disruption, but they do not by themselves deter further probing and can even make it harder to demonstrate consequences severe enough to justify a more forceful legal or strategic response.

At the same time, Russia has invested substantial effort in developing dedicated military capabilities to complement its dual-use civilian assets. The Defense Ministry's Main Directorate of Deep-Sea

Research (GUGI) is a central institution in this effort, responsible for naval and seabed intelligence and for managing specialized surface and subsurface assets used in underwater operations (Greene et al., 2026). The commissioned K-329 Belgorod nuclear-powered submarine is one prominent example, serving as a specialized mothership for deep-diving midget submarines and autonomous underwater vehicles (Sutton, 2021). This investment also extends to the continued development of unmanned systems. These include Argus-D, which is designed to place payloads on the seafloor, and Argus-I, which is designed to inspect underwater infrastructure, making both relevant to reconnaissance and sabotage (Sutton, 2026). Together, these programs demonstrate that Russia is not relying solely on dual-use civilian vessels, but is also building specialized military means to target critical underwater infrastructure.

2.3. Outsourced sabotage and proxy recruitment inside Europe

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's methods of sabotage in Europe have undergone a significant operational shift. The mass expulsion of Russian diplomats and intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover after February 2022 sharply degraded the traditional infrastructure through which Moscow had long conducted covert activity across Europe. This blow was compounded by the exposure of Russian intelligence networks, including the operatives of GRU Unit 29155, the notorious sabotage and assassination unit implicated in some of Moscow's most brazen operations abroad (Grozev & Tsalov, 2021). In November 2022, MI5 Director General Ken McCallum stated that more than 600 Russian officials had been expelled from Europe, over 400 of whom were assessed to be spies (Paton Walsh, 2022). Rather than curbing Russian hostile activity, however, this disruption appears to have accelerated an evolution in Russian tradecraft. With fewer officers able to operate safely on the ground and Western counterintelligence services on heightened alert, Russian intelligence has increasingly turned to outsourced saboteurs. These disposable agents are recruited online for missions ranging from espionage and arson to sabotage and even terrorism, often with no formal intelligence background and little understanding of who ultimately directs them (Dossier Center, 2024; Pancevski, 2025).

That shift was institutionalized in 2023 through the creation of a new GRU structure dedicated to sabotage and diversionary activity in Western states. Existing sabotage units, including Unit 29155, were folded into a broader apparatus identified as the SSD, or Service for Special Activities, under Major General Andrei Averyanov (Dossier Center, 2024; Pancevski, 2025). The new structure was reportedly tasked with carrying out killings and sabotage overseas, infiltrating Western companies and universities, and managing the recruitment and training of foreign agents (Pancevski, 2025).

Dossier describes this system as a multi-layered sabotage chain in which direction flows from the Kremlin and the Security Council through GRU leadership and then downward through officers, coordinators, operators, and finally direct executors (Dossier Center, 2024). In practice, there are often between two and seven intermediary links separating the officer from the individual who carries out the act. A single officer may remain in contact with several key coordinators, each of whom

manages a subordinate recruitment network and delegates tasks onward. This structure fragments operational knowledge, complicates attribution, and helps ensure that even when an executor is arrested, they often cannot identify the higher-level organizers.

Recruitment into this architecture varies by mission. For lower-level assignments, such as photographing facilities, staging provocations, vandalism, or arson, recruiters often target financially vulnerable individuals or people with criminal records. These recruits are typically motivated less by ideology than by money (Dossier Center, 2024). For higher-value tasks, however, such as attacks on defense-industrial sites or targeted killings, the system becomes more selective, prioritizing recruits with military experience, deeper local integration, or broader access to sensitive information (Dossier Center, 2024).

An OCCRP undercover investigation provides rare detail on how this process works in practice. Journalists posing as a 26-year-old Estonian man contacted the "privet bot" Telegram account after seeing it promoted within militant networks. Despite its name, the account was managed by a live operator. The exchange began with questions about military experience, criminal history, and willingness to engage in violence, allowing the recruiter to assess utility, risk tolerance, and expendability. The assignments themselves followed a pattern of gradual escalation, ranging from relatively simple reconnaissance tasks to arson against NATO equipment and targeted killings, with the operator offering cryptocurrency rewards of up to $10,000 "per head" (Huppertz et al., 2024).

2.3.1. Cases

Russia's outsourced sabotage campaign matters because of the breadth of incidents it has already enabled across Europe. By 2024, more than 50 people linked to such networks had reportedly been detained across Europe (Dossier Center, 2024). The resulting operations have targeted a wide range of sites and infrastructure. In Latvia, recruits photographed a NATO base and prepared an arson attack. In Poland, detained suspects allegedly attempted to disrupt trains carrying military aid to Ukraine. In Germany, authorities arrested two dual nationals allegedly recruited for attacks on U.S. targets. Other incidents included the May 2024 fire at an Ikea in Lithuania and the total destruction of Warsaw's largest shopping center (Dossier Center, 2024). By 2025, roughly 40 arson plots in Germany and Poland alone had been linked to Russia (Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025). Taken together, these cases show that Russian-linked violence in Europe spans everything from petty vandalism and antisemitic graffiti to arson, bomb plots, staged false-flag protests, and attempted assassinations (McGrath, 2024; Dossier Center, 2023).

Two cases are especially revealing because they show how this architecture could move beyond localized sabotage toward mass-casualty risk and high-value assassination. One was the July 2024 DHL parcel plot, in which magnesium-based incendiary devices disguised inside parcels ignited at logistics hubs in Leipzig, Birmingham, and near Warsaw (Dossier Center, 2024; Pancevski, 2025). Western officials assessed the operation as a test run designed to probe weaknesses in cargo-air

security and evaluate whether similar devices could be placed on planes bound for North America. According to the former head of Germany's domestic intelligence service, if one of the devices had ignited in flight, it could have brought down the aircraft. Catastrophe was avoided only because a connecting flight was delayed and the device went off at the airport instead (Pancevski, 2025). The plot also appears to have built on earlier SSD-linked sabotage methods. Western intelligence officials linked the Warsaw mall arson and earlier Ukraine plots to similar incendiary devices, suggesting that elements of the technique had been tested in ground-based attacks before being adapted to the parcel operation (Pancevski, 2025; Dossier Center, 2024).

The second case involved the foiled assassination plot against Armin Papperger, the chief executive of the German defense manufacturer Rheinmetall. In mid-2024, U.S. and German intelligence services disrupted a plan to murder Papperger, who had been identified as a high-value target due to his company's central role in supplying artillery ammunition to Ukraine (Pancevski, 2025). Intelligence sources indicated that the plot was part of a broader campaign targeting leaders of the Western defense-industrial sector (Dossier Center, 2024).

This model of using paid agents for risky operations is not entirely new. Russian military intelligence had already tested similar methods in Afghanistan between 2016 and 2020, running a campaign to provide money to Taliban-linked militants to carry out attacks against U.S. forces and their allies (Jones, 2025). That activity was overseen by Lieutenant General Ivan Kasianenko, who is now the deputy head of the SSD (Dossier Center, 2024). What is new, however, is the scale, accessibility, and centrality of this method in Russia's confrontation with the West. Outsourced sabotage has become one of the Kremlin's main instruments for projecting pressure into Europe while minimizing direct exposure for its own officers.

These attacks are designed to generate cumulative political effects. They disrupt concrete nodes of support for Ukraine while steadily raising insecurity across Western societies (Dossier Center, 2024). Even minor incidents can fuel panic, erode trust in state capacity, and empower anti-mainstream political forces more sympathetic to Russian interests (Huppertz et al., 2024). Ultimately, this model of outsourced sabotage allows the Kremlin to intensify pressure and degrade Western resolve by exploiting the ambiguity of attribution while remaining below the threshold of a unified military response.

2.4. Navigation Warfare and Aviation Disruption

Another important component of Russia's sub-threshold pressure campaign is navigation warfare through Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) interference, especially jamming and spoofing. In aviation and maritime contexts, jamming refers to intentional radio-frequency interference that prevents receivers from locking onto satellite signals, while spoofing involves broadcasting counterfeit signals that cause receivers to calculate false position, navigation, and timing data (SKYbrary Aviation Safety, n.d.). Because these disruptions affect shared civil navigation systems used across

airspace and maritime routes, their consequences often extend beyond military targets and across borders.

In Europe, two regional hubs are especially important. The first is Kaliningrad, Russia's heavily militarized exclave between Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic Sea. Interference emanating from this zone has been linked to disruptions across the Baltic States and Poland, as illustrated in Figure 5 (Höller, 2025; McGrath, 2024; Wiseman, 2025a). The second is the occupied Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, which anchors Russian electronic-warfare coverage in the Black Sea and parts of the Balkans, a pattern visible in Figure 6 (LaGrone, 2017; Wiseman, 2025b).

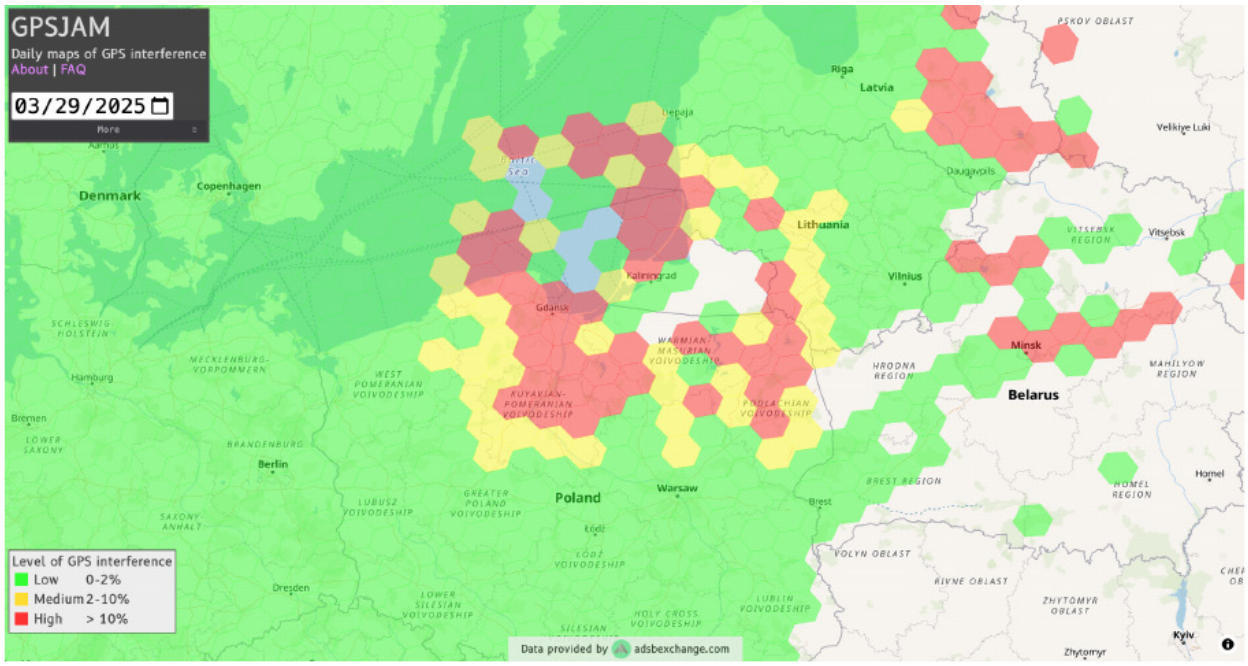

Figure 5: GPS interference in the Baltic region on March 29, 2025. Note. Map generated from aircraft-reported navigation accuracy data over a 24-hour UTC period via GPSJAM (Wiseman, 2025a).

The effectiveness of these regional hubs is determined by how different hardware interacts with the electromagnetic spectrum. Satellite navigation signals operate in the L-band with primary frequencies ranging from 1176 MHz to 1602 MHz (Taoglas, 2024). These signals utilize centimeter-scale wavelengths and require a direct line of sight between the satellite and the receiver to function correctly. Because these waves are relatively weak by the time they reach Earth, they can be easily overwhelmed by specialized jammers that flood the sky with noise on those specific microwave frequencies.

Russia has invested heavily in these territories to build a sophisticated and multilayered electronic warfare network where each system provides a distinct utility. The 14Ts227 Tobol is a stationary

platform that Russia utilizes for regional navigation and satellite warfare by flooding the L-band frequencies between 1.2 GHz and 1.6 GHz with high power interference (Defense Express, 2024). While commercial constellations such as Starlink utilize higher frequency bands for data transmission, their ground terminals remain functionally dependent on these L-band signals for timing and beam steering. By disrupting this synchronization, Tobol effectively disables both military and civilian connectivity across Poland and the Baltic States (Defense Express, 2024).

The network also includes the Krasukha family of mobile jamming complexes which provide active electronic suppression against airborne and space based assets. These systems target frequencies up to 40 GHz to neutralize airborne surveillance sensors, blind low-orbit spy satellites, and disrupt high-speed satellite communication links within a three hundred kilometer radius (Saha, 2024). This capability ensures that Russian forces can simultaneously suppress tactical movements while maintaining a wide scale electronic shield over the region.

At the strategic level, the Murmansk-BN system provides the final layer of denial across very large distances. It was deployed in Crimea in 2017 and identified at the Okunevo antenna site in Kaliningrad by 2018 (LaGrone, 2017; Höller, 2025). This system targets the High Frequency band between 3 MHz and 30 MHz where radio waves measure tens of meters. Because these waves bounce off the ionosphere, they can travel up to 8,000 kilometers to suppress the High Frequency Global Communications System which NATO uses as a primary backup for nuclear command and long range bombers (Sergeev, 2025). This allows a single site to theoretically disrupt military radio traffic as far away as the United States or Africa (Höller, 2025; Sergeev, 2025). This integrated approach ensures that Russian forces can simultaneously disrupt local tactical navigation and radar imaging while maintaining the capacity for wide scale strategic communication denial across the entire Atlantic theater.

By late 2023 and early 2024, the scale of Baltic GNSS disruption had become difficult to dismiss as background electronic noise. Widespread jamming in December 2023 affected flights across Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Poland, and the Baltic States, and in March 2024 Russia was suspected of interfering with the GPS signal of a plane carrying British Defence Secretary Grant Shapps, pushing the issue to a new level of political visibility (McGrath, 2024). The pattern was not confined to the Baltic region but extended into the Black Sea environment as well. On August 31, 2025, Ursula von der Leyen's aircraft reported GPS issues while approaching Plovdiv, Bulgaria, within the wider Black Sea interference environment shown in Figure 6 (Wiseman, 2025b). Even though attribution remains contested, the episode still illustrates how electronic-warfare activity can affect high-level civilian flights far from the front line (Nilsson-Julien & Gwyn Jones, 2025).

In July 2025, the Council of the European Union formally linked GNSS disruptions in several European countries to EW activity from Kaliningrad, citing jamming and spoofing that primarily affected the Baltic States and disrupted civil aviation (Council of the European Union, 2025). Its listings also covered the 841st Separate Electronic Warfare Center and two high-ranking members of its staff overseeing operations in the Kaliningrad region (Council of the European Union, 2025).

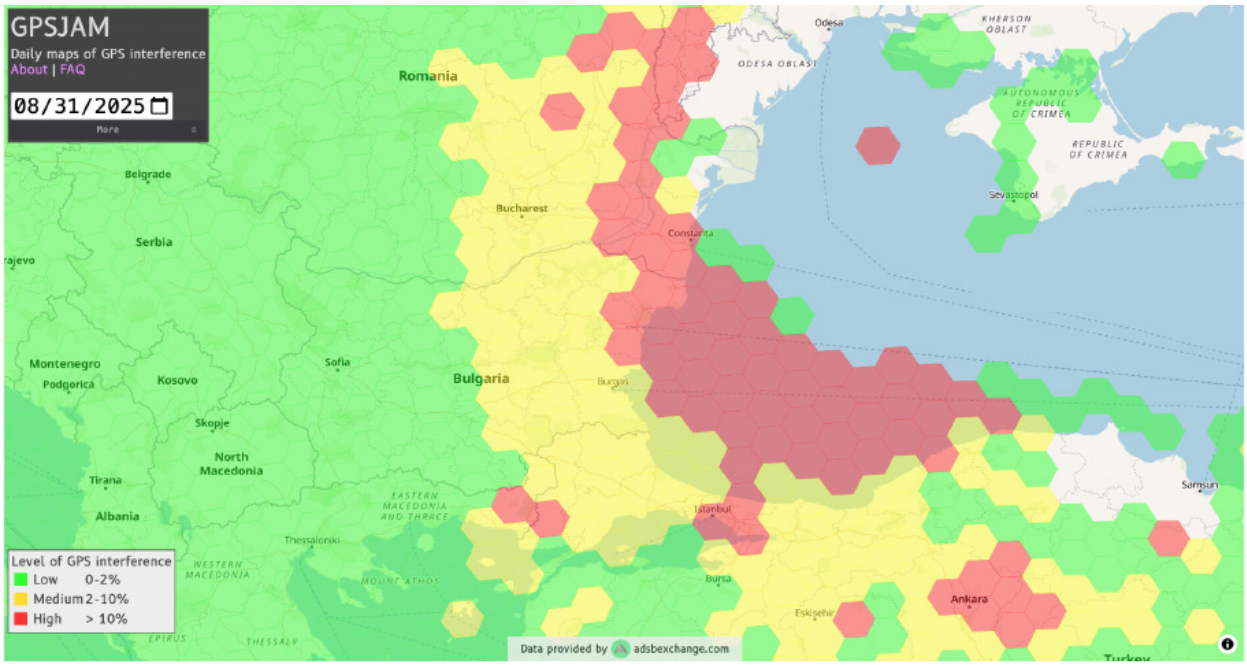

Figure 6: GPS interference in the western Black Sea region on August 31, 2025. Note. Map generated from aircraft-reported navigation accuracy data over a 24-hour UTC period via GPSJAM (Wiseman, 2025b).

This gave the issue formal EU attribution tied to both a specific military unit and named personnel.

By January 2026, the problem had clearly expanded beyond aviation alone. In a joint open letter, fourteen coastal states of the Baltic Sea and North Sea, together with Iceland, warned the international maritime community about growing GNSS interference originating from the Russian Federation. They described it as a threat to maritime safety in European waters, especially in the Baltic Sea region (Government Offices of Sweden, 2026). What began as an aviation issue had become a wider regional security problem. GNSS interference is therefore an ideal hybrid instrument: it is deniable, scalable, difficult to attribute in real time, and capable of imposing cumulative pressure on NATO and EU states.

2.5. Strategic Durability: Russia's War Economy and Force Regeneration

As of early 2026, the combined nominal GDP of NATO's 32 members exceeds $55 trillion, compared with roughly $2.51 trillion for Russia (Kramer & Binnendijk, 2026; International Monetary Fund, n.d.). Yet aggregate wealth alone is a misleading measure of military danger. Russia has placed a far larger share of its economy on a war footing, officially allocating 6.3 percent of GDP and about 34 percent of its federal budget to total military expenditure in 2026 (Cooper, 2026). Based on the forecast exchange rate of 92.2 roubles per dollar, this yields an official military budget of approximately $161.5 billion. In practical terms, however, Russian military expenditure is equivalent to

nearly three times its paper value. When adjusted for Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) using the 2.92x multiplier derived from Russia's $7.34 trillion PPP GDP, real spending power reaches approximately $471 billion. General GDP-PPP is not the same as a defense-specific price index. Still, this conversion remains a useful proxy for Russia's command over domestic resources, especially because market exchange rates understate the lower domestic costs of personnel and indigenous military production. Even these figures likely understate the scale of the effort, as war-related expenditures are often diffused across civilian budget chapters and regional subsidies. Furthermore, the Iran war launched in early 2026 drove a surge in hydrocarbon prices and loosened some restrictions on Russian oil flows. These shifts are expected to reduce Moscow's budget constraints and could prompt further upward revisions to military spending this year.

This military pivot has fundamentally reshaped the Russian labor market. Defense-industrial employment has become a major pull on Russia's labor market, with higher wages and expanding state contracts drawing workers out of the civilian economy and intensifying competition for manpower across regions (Kozmin, 2025). To fill persistent industrial shortages, the state has turned to convict labor (Borogan & Soldatov, 2023). At the same time, factories in the military-industrial sector have operated around the clock to sustain wartime production (Albright et al., 2025). This effort has been supported by a class of highly effective technocrats. Most notable are the head of Russia's Central Bank and the civilian economist serving as Minister of Defense, both of whom have helped shield the financial system from collapse while sustaining unprecedented levels of military expenditure. However, regardless of their effort, this one-way spending has institutionalized a systemic "war trap" (Jones & McCabe, 2026). The Russian economy is now deeply dependent on continued military expenditure, with strong pressures to maintain weapons production and expand payrolls in order to avoid a painful adjustment in the event of peace (Jones & McCabe, 2026).

Parallel to this industrial surge, Russia has demonstrated a staggering willingness to absorb extreme losses that far exceed what most Western societies would tolerate. Recent estimates place Russian casualties in Ukraine at roughly 1.2 million, including up to 325,000 dead, by the end of 2025 (Jones & McCabe, 2026). After the political backlash caused by the partial mobilization in September 2022, the Kremlin adapted by rebranding military service as a powerful "social elevator" (Re: Russia, 2025). This transactional recruitment model-or "Deathonomics" utilizes life-changing financial incentives to attract contract soldiers from economically deprived regions who effectively sell their lives to stabilize their families finances (Inozemtsev, 2026).

2.5.1. Case Study

The Alabuga (Yelabuga) Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has become one of the clearest examples of Russian war-economy adaptation and force regeneration. Located roughly 1,000 to 1,100 kilometers east of the Ukrainian border, the site has evolved from a limited industrial project into a major drone-production complex centered on the Geran-1 and Geran-2 drones (Bermudez et al., 2026). By early 2026, it had expanded from two buildings under construction into a seventeen-facility complex

comprising up to 116 buildings across more than 2.82 square kilometers (Bermudez et al., 2026). The facility was reportedly producing more than 5,500 drones per month to support the war effort. This scale of output has direct implications for NATO security; for instance, during a September 2025 airspace incursion involving approximately 20 Russian drones, allied forces reportedly struggled to intercept the volume, downing only four units. Because Alabuga produces enough drones to replace that entire 20-drone strike package in roughly 2.6 hours, it can theoretically provide the capacity for such saturation events over nine times a day from a single industrial site.

That production model depends on a large, exploitative, and increasingly internationalized labor regime. Alabuga Polytech and Alabuga Build both play key roles in that system, drawing students directly into drone production, construction, and auxiliary work. Because conscription begins at eighteen, sixteen-year-olds have become the "backbone" of production (Albright et al., 2025). This workforce is supplemented by the Alabuga Start program, which by 2025 had recruited nearly 8,500 workers from 77 countries, primarily women from Africa (Albright et al., 2025). Up to 12,000 North Korean workers were also reportedly being recruited for the SEZ (Albright et al., 2025; Bermudez et al., 2026). By mid-2025, satellite imagery showed twelve new production-related workspaces and residential infrastructure capable of housing roughly 41,200 people once completed, highlighting the scale of the industrial buildup underway at the site (Albright et al., 2025).

The sanctions dimension is what makes Alabuga especially important as a case study of Russian adaptation. The facility is sustained by a strategic "circle of cooperation" that bypasses Western sanctions. While Iranian technology launched the project, China has provided critical dual-use components, machine tools, and logistics support through the nearby Deng Xiaoping Logistics Terminal. This integrated ecosystem allows Russia to scale production ahead of schedule while providing Iranian and North Korean partners with valuable combat feedback on their systems' performance against NATO-standard defenses (Bermudez et al., 2026).

Russia's war economy should therefore be understood as a system of long-term military adaptation. The scale of defense spending, labor-market restructuring, the transactional recruitment model, and the rapid expansion of production hubs such as Alabuga all point to a state reorganizing society and industry around prolonged confrontation rather than preparing for demobilization. This buildup extends beyond the conventional weapons consumed in Ukraine. Moscow has continued investing in so-called "super weapons" intended less for ordinary battlefield use than for deterrence, intimidation, and blackmail, while also expanding the broader force posture needed for future confrontation with NATO (Bendett et al., 2021). Evidence of this shift is visible in the revival of bases near the Finnish border, the permanent stationing of forces in Belarus, and the expansion of nuclear infrastructure in the Arctic and Kaliningrad (Orlova, 2025; Khomenko & Frolova, 2026). Russia has also reduced the constraining effect of sanctions by embedding its rearmament within a wider authoritarian support network. Military-technological cooperation with Iran and North Korea, reliance on China for dual-use components and microchips necessary for weapons production, and the continued use of the shadow fleet to bypass oil price caps and maintain treasury liquidity have all helped

sustain military production and absorb wartime pressure. The broader implication is that Russia is not preparing for peace. It is building a more resilient and increasingly self-sustaining war machine capable of sustaining operations in Ukraine while regenerating capacity for future confrontation beyond its current battlefield.

3. Policy Implications for European Security

The central policy implication of this paper is that NATO's collective-defense architecture remains more effective at deterring overt conventional attack than at deterring cumulative, deniable, and politically contested coercion. Article 5 retains enormous strategic value, but the same flexibility that preserves alliance cohesion in conventional crises becomes a liability when an adversary deliberately operates in the space between peace and war. Russia does not need a single dramatic blow to weaken deterrence. It benefits when cyberattacks, sabotage, airspace violations, information operations, and political interference force NATO into slow, improvised, case-by-case responses. If deterrence is to be restored, the Alliance must reduce the ambiguity that Moscow exploits without eliminating the political discretion that has historically made NATO sustainable (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025a, 2025b; Bajarūnas, 2025).

First, NATO should narrow rather than attempt to abolish Article 5 discretion. A formal treaty revision would be politically difficult and strategically unnecessary. A more realistic solution would be a jointly adopted interpretive declaration, paired with a dedicated hybrid-response annex, that identifies categories of hostile action that may amount to an armed attack when they produce sufficiently grave strategic effects. These categories should include cyber operations against critical infrastructure, deliberate sabotage of undersea cables or energy systems, repeated drone or aircraft incursions, sustained GNSS disruption endangering civilian safety, and coordinated information operations linked to wider acts of disruption. NATO has already stated that significant cyberattacks and other hybrid attacks may be considered under Article 5, and it has developed counter-hybrid support tools, but leaving thresholds entirely undefined continues to invite probing. The goal should therefore not be a single automatic trigger for war, but a graduated ladder of presumptive responses ranging from emergency consultations and public attribution to cyber assistance, force reinforcement, sanctions coordination, and, in the gravest cases, collective-defense measures (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025c, 2026; Bajarūnas, 2025).

Second, NATO needs faster political and attribution machinery. In hybrid contingencies, the problem is often not total uncertainty but delay in transforming evidence into collective action. The North Atlantic Council should adopt standing rapid-consultation timelines and pre-agreed incident-assessment procedures so that ambiguous attacks cannot remain indefinitely trapped in procedural debate. A permanent allied attribution mechanism integrating military, cyber, maritime, intelligence, and open-source inputs would help create a common evidentiary baseline within hours rather than weeks. Pre-negotiated response menus would preserve national sovereignty while reducing

paralysis: Allies would still retain political choice, but they would no longer begin every crisis from institutional zero. This matters because Article 4 consultations have repeatedly served as the political holding area for hybrid and escalatory incidents, including the Russian airspace violations that led Poland and Estonia to seek consultations in September 2025 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025c; Greene et al., 2026).

Third, resilience must be linked to punishment. NATO rightly emphasizes resilience, civil preparedness, and national responsibility in responding to hybrid threats. Yet resilience alone is a strategy of absorption, not deterrence. A state willing to keep probing will adapt to hardened targets unless each incident carries predictable strategic costs. For that reason, resilience measures such as protected energy grids, backup communications, GNSS alternatives, undersea infrastructure surveillance, continuity-of-government planning, and regularly exercised recovery procedures should be paired with pre-agreed cost-imposition tools. These should include coordinated sanctions, intelligence exposure, expulsions, cyber countermeasures consistent with international law, maritime security operations, and visible adjustments to force posture on the eastern flank. NATO's own resilience framework stresses that clear plans and response measures must be defined ahead of time and exercised regularly, while recent Alliance commitments on critical infrastructure and civil preparedness show that the institutional basis for this already exists. What is still missing is a stronger link between resilience and consequence (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024a, 2026; Greene et al., 2026).

Fourth, NATO and the EU must treat political warfare as a collective-defense issue rather than as a secondary domestic problem. Russian support for anti-establishment actors, covert influence networks, disinformation campaigns, and manipulative information operations is designed not merely to shape opinion but to erode the political cohesion on which Article 5 depends. NATO has already developed a more systematic approach to information threats built around understanding, prevention, containment, mitigation, and recovery. But NATO alone cannot regulate party finance, campaign transparency, platform accountability, or media ownership. That requires closer institutional coordination with the EU and national governments. A credible policy response should therefore include common transparency rules for foreign funding, joint monitoring of hostile information campaigns, shared public-attribution standards, and pre-bunking strategies that expose hostile narratives before they harden in public debate. If democratic publics remain uncertain about what counts as aggression, then legal commitments will continue to appear politically negotiable at precisely the moment when clarity matters most (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025; Bajarūnas, 2025).

Fifth, institutional reform must be matched by credible forward capability. Russia is more likely to intensify hybrid pressure when NATO's forward presence appears symbolic, slow to reinforce, or disconnected from sub-threshold coercion. The Alliance has already strengthened the eastern flank through multinational battlegroups, rapid-reinforcement planning, integrated air and missile defense, Baltic Sentry, and Eastern Sentry. Those steps should now be integrated into a doctrine of defensive depth rather than tripwire symbolism. That means more pre-positioned equipment,

stronger air and missile defenses, wider maritime and undersea surveillance, and large-scale exercises that rehearse escalation from hybrid disruption into limited conventional confrontation. The goal is to deny hybrid action a permissive corridor into wider coercion. A stronger forward posture is therefore not separate from hybrid deterrence; it is what gives hybrid deterrence credibility (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025b).

Finally, Western governments must abandon the expectation that diplomacy by itself can stabilize this contest. Negotiation remains necessary in crisis management, but it cannot substitute for a security architecture that denies Russia the benefits of gradual escalation. If, as this paper argues, the Kremlin treats peace as an operational pause within long-term confrontation, then the goal of European security policy cannot be a naive return to prewar normality. It must instead be the construction of a system in which hybrid coercion fails to generate legal confusion, political hesitation, or operational delay. In that sense, the most urgent reform is conceptual as much as institutional: NATO and the EU must begin treating sustained hybrid pressure as part of the battlespace of deterrence, not as a series of isolated anomalies below it (Greene et al., 2026; Bajarūnas, 2025).

4. Conclusion

Russia's challenge to European security has developed into a durable form of confrontation rooted in doctrine, regime-security ideology, coercive institutions, and military adaptation. This paper has shown that the Kremlin's security elite treats nonmilitary pressure, political destabilization, information warfare, sabotage, and calibrated military coercion as integrated instruments for shaping the strategic environment before and alongside armed forces. Within that framework, hybrid warfare is one of the central operating logics of Russian strategy.

This carries major implications for European security. NATO's collective-defense architecture remains highly effective against overt conventional attack, yet it is less well suited to an adversary that exploits ambiguity, deniability, and cumulative pressure below clear legal and political thresholds. Article 5 still holds immense symbolic and strategic value, but the political discretion embedded within it has created a structural vulnerability that Moscow repeatedly probes. A system built to respond to legible aggression is now being tested by a strategy designed to remain just below decisive response while steadily eroding deterrent credibility.

The evidence examined here also indicates that Russia is preparing for prolonged confrontation rather than stabilization. The consolidation of the siloviki state, the militarization of regime survival, the logic of active defense, the normalization of hybrid methods, and the expansion of the war economy all point toward a state adapting for endurance, coercion, and periodic escalation. Europe therefore faces a structural contest with a power that has reorganized itself for long-term pressure.

The central task now is to adapt the existing security architecture materially and conceptually to

the kind of conflict already underway. If ambiguity continues to shield hostile action from timely consequence, deterrence will weaken even while formal guarantees remain unchanged. The most urgent lesson of this project is straightforward: Europe cannot preserve peace while treating sustained hybrid pressure as something outside the core battlespace of deterrence. Unless the gap between Russian strategy and Western response is narrowed, the cumulative pressure that now appears manageable may become the pathway to a wider war whose warning signs have long been visible.

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Nuclear Weapons and the Politics of Apology

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Abstract: This paper makes two arguments about international apology—defined here as a public statement by a state or its official representative that acknowledges wrongdoing and expresses remorse for a historical grievance against another state. First, apologies usually follow reconciliation rather than initiate it: cross-national evidence shows that states seldom apologize during rivalry, become more likely to do so after relations improve, and benefit from apology mainly in non-rival relationships where it can consolidate existing cooperation. Second, the US–Japan nuclear case is a theoretically important deviation from this pattern. Although the two countries have long maintained a stable and cooperative alliance, the United States has never apologized for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I argue that this absence persists because four forces operate together: domestic backlash in the United States, limited demand for apology in Japan, alliance-management incentives, and the unique strategic and identity significance of nuclear weapons. These mechanisms make apology politically infeasible even where structural conditions would otherwise favor it. The paper thus shows both when apologies tend to emerge and why they may remain absent even in deeply reconciled relationships.

Keywords: International apology, nuclear weapons, US-Japan relations, reconciliation, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, alliance management

1. Introduction

Eighty years ago, the Truman administration made a decision that continues to shape international politics today. In August 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To date, these remain the only instances in which nuclear weapons have been used in war. At least 150,000 Japanese perished, the majority of them civilians (Tomonaga 2019). In the decades since, there have been persistent demands—from survivor organizations, civil society groups, and political leaders in Japan and internationally—for the US to apologize for the

use of nuclear weapons (The Conversation 2025). Japanese survivors have often been at the forefront of this call. For example, Terumi Tanaka, a survivor of the nuclear attack and leader of a survivors' organization, once urged that the US president should "apologize to those who died, bereaved families, and parents who lost their children" (Lind 2016a). A 2015 poll reported that about 80% of Japanese people believed the US nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unjustifiable (Pew Research Center 2015). A separate 2015 poll found that 60% of Japanese people wanted the US to apologize for the bombings (Adelstein 2016). Political leaders, too, have at times echoed this societal sentiment. For example, Shizuka Kamei, a member of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party representing Hiroshima, argued in 2016 that if then-President Obama were to come to Hiroshima "without an apology, he shouldn't come at all" (Lind 2016a).

More broadly, the post-Cold War period is often described as an "age of apology" (Zoodsma and Schaafsma 2022). Historically, the phenomenon of state-to-state apologies for historical grievances has been rare and invariably contentious (Cohen 2004). According to the Political Apology Database, there were only 61 recorded international apologies from 1947 to 1999, in stark contrast to the 133 such apologies issued in the last two decades (Schaafsma and Zoodsma 2021). As shown in Figure 1, countries increasingly employ international apologies as tools to address historical grievances with adversaries or consolidate cooperation with partners.

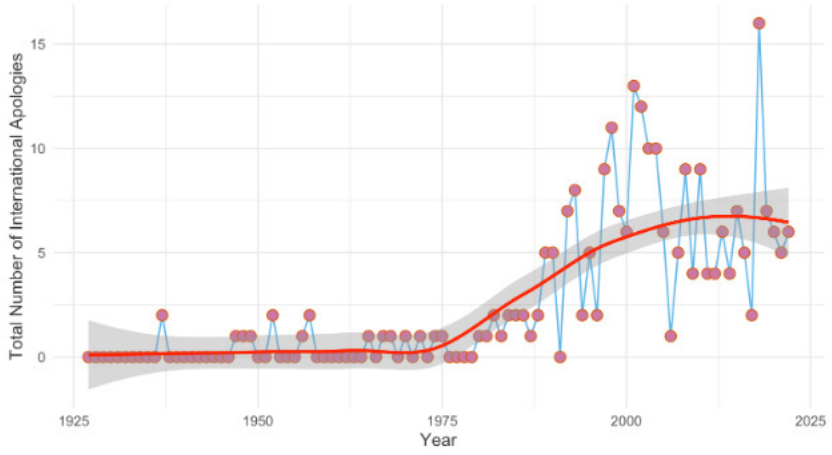

Figure 1: Annual trend of international apologies issued, 1947–2022
Note: Each point represents a dyad-year in which an apology was recorded. The blue curve is a LOESS-smoothed trend line, and the shaded band represents a 95% confidence interval around the trend. Data source: Political Apology Database (Schaafsma and Zoodsma 2021).

Against that backdrop, there has been a consistent absence of a US apology to Japan for the use of nuclear weapons. US administration has consistently refused to apologize. When asked if the US should apologize, George H.W. Bush said: "Not from this president. . . War is hell. . . but there should be no apology requested" (The Washington Post 1991). When asked if the US owed Japan an apology, Bill Clinton likewise said the US "owes no apology to Japan" for Hiroshima and Nagasaki (The

Washington Post 1995). Before visiting Hiroshima, Barack Obama said he would not apologize; the White House also stated his visit would not "revisit the decision to use the atomic bomb" (The Guardian 2016b). Joe Biden has largely followed this established script, continuing the tradition of presidential silence on the issue of apology (The New York Times 2023). This pattern extends beyond Japan. According to the Political Apology Database (Schaafsma and Zoodsma 2021), the US has issued international apologies on only six occasions across the entire postwar period: a wreath-laying gesture toward Mexico in 1947, an expression of regret to South Korea over the No Gun Ri killings in 2001, two apologies related to the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse in 2004, and two apologies to Guatemala for Cold War-era medical experiments in 2010. None involved Japan, and none concerned nuclear weapons. Against the backdrop of the global apology surge shown in Figure 1, the rarity of US apologies underscores the specificity of the puzzle this paper addresses.

This continuity is puzzling. Across administrations—Republican and Democratic, hawkish and dovish, conservative and liberal—US leaders have converged on the same position: no apology for the use of nuclear weapons. International apologies, as instruments of public diplomacy, are predominantly perceived as efforts to foster foreign goodwill and cooperation. The apology literature is dominated by apology advocates who assume, infer, or rhetorically imply the capacity, or at least the potential, of international apologies to improve bilateral relations (Yang and Diehl 2025). Some empirical evidence supports this claim. Aldar, Kampf, and Heimann (2021) analyze Israel's apology to Turkey following its 2013 military operation against civilian ships, finding that the apology contributed to relationship improvement. Similarly, using survey experiments, Kitagawa and Chu (2021) find that recipient audiences in Japan generally reward apologizing states for historical grievances, indicating the positive impact of such gestures on public opinion. If that is the case, given the potential international benefits of apologies, why has no US administration apologized to Japan?

This paper argues that the answer becomes clear only when the US-Japan case is situated against the broader politics of apology. Cross-nationally, apologies tend to cluster in relationships that have already moved beyond rivalry. The US-Japan case therefore stands out as a theoretically important deviation: the dyad meets the conditions under which apology should be likely, yet none has been offered. I argue that this absence is sustained by four interlocking mechanisms: domestic backlash in the United States, heterogeneous demand in Japan, alliance-management imperatives, and the distinctive strategic and identity stakes attached to nuclear weapons. Together, they render apology politically infeasible even within a close alliance.

To develop this argument, I first clarify what role apologies play in international politics and how they are often misunderstood. I then present cross-national evidence on when apologies occur and what effects they are associated with. The evidence is intended to establish the baseline against which the US-Japan case becomes meaningful. The remainder and bulk of the paper explain why the US-Japan case deviates from that baseline, focusing on the interplay of domestic politics, public opinion, security interests, and the unique status of nuclear weapons in American identity and security doctrine. I also consider what has emerged in place of apology that has allowed the two

countries to reconcile without one. Before proceeding, it is useful to note that the dynamics explored here are not unique to the US-Japan case, even if they manifest with particular intensity in it. In other historical dyads, including Japan and South Korea over colonial-era atrocities, and France and Algeria over the Algerian War, similar tensions between domestic constraints, alliance management, and the sequencing of apology and reconciliation have shaped whether and when apologies emerge. These cases are discussed in greater detail below.

2. The Politics of Apologies: Common Misunderstandings

The first common misunderstanding of international apologies is that apologies, being fundamentally symbolic acts, are just diplomatic "cheap talk" (Horelt 2019). This view treats apologies as empty words on symbolic dates that are easy to issue and retract. Critics argue that such statements cannot reverse historical grievances (Tavuchis 1993) and may be employed strategically to sidestep the substantial costs of reparations or legal consequences (Bilder 2006). In practice, however, apologies are far from costless. Leaders who issue them often face partisan attacks, public backlash, and measurable declines in domestic approval. This pattern has been confirmed by cross-national survey experiments, which show a general disapproval among citizens of the apologizing state toward issuing apologies (Kitagawa and Chu 2021). The domestic cost of apology is also illustrated by West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's 1970 gesture of kneeling before the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising memorial, which is a gesture widely read as a sincere apology (Andrieu 2009). A contemporaneous poll found 48% of West Germans deemed the gesture "excessive," underscoring deep division at home (Deutsches Historisches Museum 2016). Those domestic costs are what foreign audiences can observe and evaluate. The price of an apology is paid in domestic backlash. Apology feasibility is therefore mainly a domestic calculus. Once issued, apologies generate political costs that leaders cannot easily recover. Importantly, the mechanism that makes apologies credible costly signals does not require that domestic backlash be permanent, only that it be substantial enough at the time of issuance to deter insincere leaders from mimicking the gesture. Domestic opinion may soften over time—Brandt's kneeling, once divisive, is now widely celebrated in Germany—but leaders must make the decision to apologize under conditions of contemporary political risk, not future vindication. In this sense, the willingness to incur immediate electoral or reputational penalties signals the leader's resolve to pursue peace and repair relations (Long and Brecke 2003). It is worth acknowledging that domestic and international time horizons may diverge. Domestic backlash may fade as generations turn over, while the international goodwill generated by an apology may prove more durable. If so, a leader who apologizes may pay a short-term domestic price but generate lasting foreign-policy returns. The difficulty is that leaders must act under present political conditions, and few are willing to absorb certain near-term costs for uncertain long-term gains, particularly when the domestic narrative framing the grievance remains contested.

A second common misunderstanding is that states with peaceful or cooperative relations do not apologize to one another. This assumption parallels findings in psychology that the effects of indi-

vidual apologies are conditional on the quality of the relationship. Experimental and survey research shows that individual apologies exert greater influence in rivalrous relationships and limited influence where relations are already positive (Schumann 2012). Individuals who are satisfied with their relationships often forgive partners regardless of whether an apology is offered. By contrast, dissatisfied partners stand to gain more from apology and other conciliatory gestures. In this way, individual apology serves a more instrumental role in repairing damaged relationships than in maintaining already friendly ones. Empirically, however, the international pattern suggests otherwise. The Political Apology Database (Zoodsma et al. 2021) records 168 interstate apologies issued between 1947 and 2022, covering cases in which a state or its official representative publicly acknowledged wrongdoing toward another state. The Peace Data (Diehl, Goertz, and Gallegos 2021) classify bilateral relationships on a continuum from severe rivalry to warm peace, based on indicators including militarized dispute history, alliance ties, and diplomatic exchanges. When these two datasets are merged, 81.76 percent of international apologies occur between countries that have moved beyond rivalry and entered peaceful relations. Notably, 10.14 percent are exchanged between states in conditions of warm peace, which are relationships characterized by stable expectations of peaceful conflict resolution and a shared understanding that the use of force is "unthinkable." Examples include apologies between the United Kingdom and Ireland, Germany and France, and Japan and Australia. Unlike interpersonal relations, cooperation does not eliminate the practice of or motivation for apology-making in international relations.

A third common misunderstanding is that international apologies have uniform effects. Much of the public diplomacy literature assumes that conciliatory acts will reliably reduce negative perceptions of an adversary (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush 2021). Yet signals rarely speak for themselves and are often interpreted in ways the sender did not intend (Jervis 1976). Even costly signals are subject to divergent interpretation: some audiences may view an apology as a gesture of reconciliation, while others interpret it as an admission of aggressiveness or a sign of weakness (Herrmann 2017). As the next section shows, these divergent effects depend heavily on the prior relationship between the states involved.

3. The Politics of Apologies: Baseline Patterns

When do countries apologize to each other? To understand the absence of apologies between the US and Japan, it is necessary to first consider when states typically issue apologies to one another. At its core, this question concerns the sequencing of apology and reconciliation: do international apologies precede reconciliation, or do they follow from it? A large body of the apology literature has recognized international apologies' ability, or at least their potential, to improve bilateral relations. This perspective suggests that states issue apologies in order to initiate improvements in bilateral relations (Andrieu 2009; Renner 2011; Weyeneth 2001). If relations are already stable or cooperative, the perceived need and political incentive to apologize should be low. Reflecting this view, US President Barack Obama, when asked in 2016 whether he would apologize for the atomic

bombing of Hiroshima, replied that such a gesture was unnecessary given the "strong and cooperative" US-Japan relationship (The Guardian 2016b). His response captures a widespread assumption: apologies are relevant only in contexts of strain, not friendship.

Although scholars often treat apologies as causes of reconciliation, I argue instead that they are more accurately understood as consequences of it. The decision to apologize is shaped less by the moral logic of remorse than by the feasibility of doing so. Leaders in the apologizing state may recognize potential diplomatic or reputational gains from apologizing yet face strong domestic constraints. Apologies often invite accusations of weakness or humiliation and may generate fears of new demands from the recipient state. Rivalries magnify these costs: the public in the apologizing state expects the recipient state to exploit apology rather than reciprocate it, intensifying domestic backlash against conciliatory leaders. As relations improve, however, expectations of reciprocity become more credible and the perceived risk of exploitation declines. Domestic opposition weakens, making such gestures viable. By this stage, however, apologies serve less as catalysts for peace than as affirmations of it. They become symbolic acts that consolidate reconciliation rather than initiate it.

Comparative examples illustrate this sequencing. Japan's repeated apologies to South Korea for colonial-era abuses, including the 1993 Kono Statement and the 1995 Murayama Statement, came only after decades of normalization, beginning with the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations. Similarly, the France–West Germany rapprochement proceeded through economic integration, NATO alignment, and symbolic acts of reconciliation before culminating in formal expressions of regret (Lind 2008). In each case, apologies followed rather than initiated the improvement of relations.

3.1. Cross-national evidence

To move beyond individual cases and examine whether these patterns hold more broadly, I constructed a dataset of historical grievances between states. Drawing on the transitional justice, reconciliation, and international memory-politics literatures, I identified 556 distinct instances in which one state committed an acknowledged wrong against another, such as wartime atrocities, colonial abuses, territorial seizures, or political violence, and for which an apology had either been issued or could reasonably have been expected. These 556 cases span 471 unique pairs of states and encompass diverse transgression types (Figure 2). By merging these data with the 168 recorded apologies from the Political Apology Database, I can compare cases in which apologies were issued with those in which they were withheld.

The outcome of interest is simply whether an apology was issued for that grievance or not. Two predictors capture different dimensions of the bilateral relationship. The first is whether the two states are locked in an ongoing strategic rivalry at the time of the transgression, drawn from Thompson's (2001) rivalry dataset. The second captures the trajectory of the relationship: whether the two states have been moving closer together or further apart in their foreign policy positions over

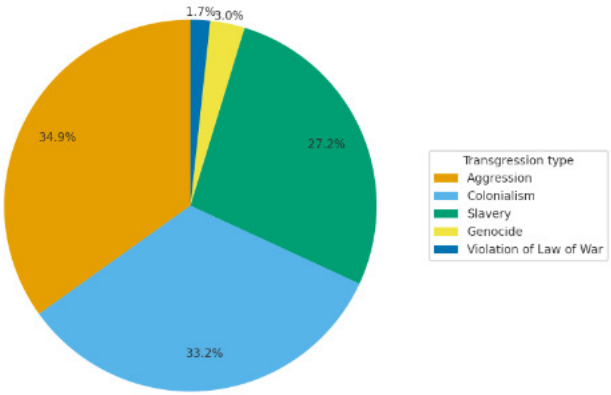

Figure 2: Distribution of transgression types in the interstate transgression dataset (n = 556)
Note: Categories include territorial disputes, wartime atrocities, colonial abuses, and other historical grievances. Each observation in the dataset represents a specific historical grievance between a perpetrator state and a victim state.

the preceding five years. I measure this using United Nations General Assembly voting similarity (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017). UNGA voting similarity is one of the most widely used indicators of bilateral foreign policy alignment in international relations research. Because every UN member state casts votes on a broad and recurring set of issues spanning security, human rights, and economic governance, changes in voting similarity offer a continuous, comparable measure of whether two states are moving closer together or further apart in their foreign policy positions. The measure is available for nearly all state dyads over the postwar period, making it well-suited for cross-national analysis. The models also account for whether both states are democracies, how economically interdependent they are, and how much time has passed since the transgression, since older grievances have simply had more years in which an apology could have occurred. I use logistic regression to analyze these data. Logistic regression is a standard statistical method designed for situations in which the outcome is binary: in this case, whether an apology was issued or not. The method estimates how each predictor, such as rivalry status or relationship trajectory, is associated with the probability of apology, while holding the other predictors constant. This allows me to assess, for example, whether rivalry reduces the likelihood of apology even after accounting for differences in trade, regime type, and the passage of time.

Figure 3 tests the first of these questions: does being in a rivalry make apology less likely? As shown in Figure 3, states rarely apologize while locked in rivalry. The estimated effect of rivalry on the probability of apology is negative and statistically significant, meaning that rivalry is associated with a substantially lower likelihood of apology. The figure displays this estimate on a logistic scale, where negative values indicate reduced probability. To translate this into more intuitive terms, I convert the estimate to an odds ratio by exponentiating the coefficient. The resulting value is approximately 0.30, which means that states in an ongoing rivalry face roughly 70 percent lower likelihood of issuing an apology compared to states not in rivalry, holding other factors constant. Even when leaders see foreign-policy value in apologizing, the heightened domestic risks render such

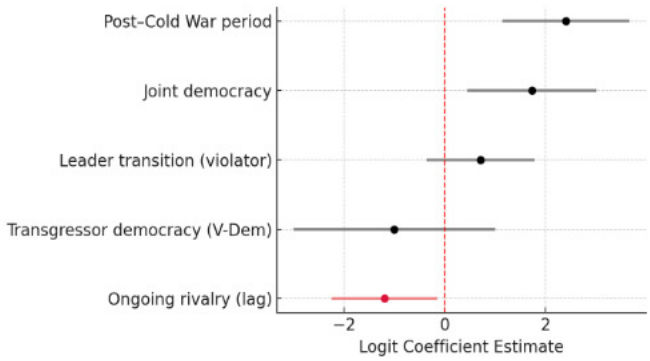

Figure 3: Rivalry status and the likelihood of international apology issuance
Notes: The point estimate represents the logistic regression coefficient for ongoing strategic rivalry; the horizontal line represents the 95% confidence interval. Values below zero indicate that rivalry reduces the probability of apology.

gestures politically untenable under rivalry conditions.

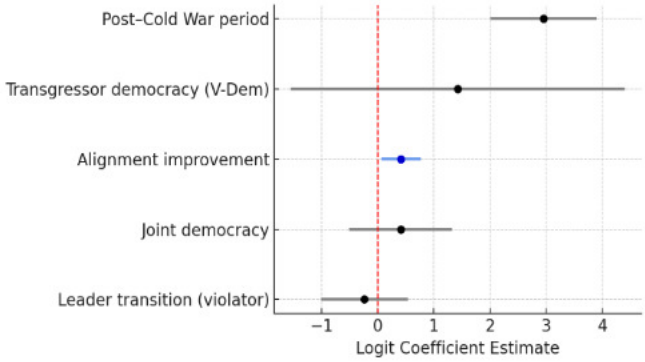

Figure 4: Relationship improvement and the likelihood of international apology issuance
Note: Whereas Figure 3 tests the effect of rivalry status (a binary indicator), this figure tests the effect of bilateral relationship improvement, measured as the five-year change in UNGA voting similarity. The point estimate represents the logistic regression coefficient; the horizontal line represents the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 4 reinforces this finding from a different angle. While Figure 3 asks whether being in a rivalry makes apology less likely, Figure 4 asks whether a warming relationship makes apology more likely. The answer is yes: apologies become significantly more probable after relations have already improved. A meaningful increase in bilateral foreign policy alignment over the preceding five years raises the probability of apology by approximately 52 percent. This figure is derived the same way as the rivalry estimate: I exponentiate the logistic coefficient for the alignment variable to obtain an odds ratio of approximately 1.52, meaning that each standard-deviation improvement in alignment is associated with 52 percent higher likelihood of apology. High-profile cases often cited as turning

points occurred only after several years of normalization and diplomatic progress, including Brandt's 1970 kneeling in Warsaw and Germany's 1997 expression of regret to the Czech Republic.

Several caveats apply. The set of historical grievances I assembled necessarily involves judgment calls about which cases to include, and some transgressions may be more politically salient than others. The analysis identifies broad patterns rather than establishing definitive cause and effect: it cannot rule out that some unmeasured factor drives both relationship improvement and apology, or that the causal direction runs the other way. These limitations are precisely why the paper pairs the cross-national analysis with a detailed case study, which allows for the kind of close examination of specific mechanisms that statistical patterns alone cannot provide.

3.2. What are the impacts of international apologies?

What happens once an apology is issued? Because foreign policy information is often complex and ambiguous, the public in the recipient state relies on simple heuristics to interpret it. One of the most salient cues is the type of the prior relationship: whether another state is perceived as a rival or a non-rival (Diehl and Goertz 2000). These relationship categories are readily accessible and easily invoked, enabling individuals to make sense of foreign gestures when information is limited or asymmetric.

In rivalries, international apologies tend to backfire. Consider Japan's apologies to South Korea and China for wartime atrocities. Despite repeated expressions of remorse, including the 1995 Murayama Statement and the 2015 "comfort women" agreement with South Korea, these gestures have frequently been met with skepticism, accusations of insincerity, and renewed demands, particularly during periods of heightened territorial or historical disputes (Lind 2008; Dudden 2008). The 2015 Japan-South Korea agreement on wartime comfort women illustrates the pattern sharply. Despite including an explicit apology from Prime Minister Abe and a billion-yen fund for survivors, the agreement triggered widespread public protest in South Korea, was denounced by survivor advocacy groups as inadequate, and was effectively dissolved by the subsequent Moon Jae-in administration. Rather than closing the chapter on historical grievance, the apology reopened it (Reuters 2015).

Rivalries are sustained by repeated disputes, competition for influence, and accumulated historical grievances, which produce stable cognitive shortcuts (Herrmann et al. 1997). When rival leaders issue apologies, the admission of historical grievances is often interpreted by the recipient state's public as confirmation of the rival's aggressive history, while the remorse component is viewed with skepticism. This occurs through motivated reasoning: the psychological tendency for individuals to interpret new information in ways that confirm their pre-existing beliefs and expectations (Kunda 1990). Rather than evaluating new information on its merits, people unconsciously select, weight, and interpret evidence in ways that reinforce what they already think. In the context of international relations, this means that when the public in a recipient state already views another country as hostile, new information from that country, including conciliatory gestures like apologies, is pro-

cessed through a filter of suspicion rather than assessed neutrally. The result is that apologies from rivals are not heard as intended: the acknowledgement of wrongdoing confirms the existing image of aggressiveness, while the expression of remorse is dismissed as insincere or strategic. In rivalries, motivated reasoning resolves the inconsistency between a rival's conciliatory act and the recipient-state public's entrenched perception of hostility by emphasizing the part of the signal that reaffirms distrust. Historical grievances leave rooted impressions of aggressiveness (Jervis 1976), and in rivalries, such aggressiveness is often attributed to immutable factors such as geography or national character. As a result, even apologies that explicitly signal peaceful intent are filtered through existing narratives of threat and insincerity.

By contrast, in non-rival contexts, international apologies can reinforce peace rather than jeopardize it. In these relationships, the public in the recipient state holds baseline expectations toward the apologizing state that are generally favorable or at least neutral. These expectations are built over time through repeated positive interactions, including trade agreements honored, alliance commitments upheld, and diplomatic crises resolved cooperatively, that generate a reservoir of trust and a presumption of benign intent (Kydd 2005). When an apology is issued by a state already regarded as cooperative, the acknowledgement of wrongdoing is interpreted not as evidence of a hostile past but as further confirmation that the apologizing state is trustworthy and committed to the relationship. The remorse component, which is discounted in rivalries, is taken at face value because it is consistent with the recipient public's prior expectations of good faith. In psychological terms, the apology is assimilated into the existing positive schema rather than processed as schema-inconsistent information requiring skeptical scrutiny (Fiske and Taylor 2013). The result is a consolidation effect: apologies in cooperative contexts validate the recipient state's historical narrative, signal that the apologizing state takes the grievance seriously, and reduce the risk of grievance-driven backsliding by publicly affirming what both sides already tacitly accept.

Figure 5 presents the results for rival and non-rival dyads side by side, allowing direct comparison of how apologies are associated with different relational trajectories depending on context. Each panel plots changes in bilateral foreign policy alignment in the year before the apology (t-1), the apology year itself (t = 0), and the year after (t+1). The shaded bands indicate the range of uncertainty around each estimate; where the band crosses the zero line, the change is not statistically distinguishable from no effect.

In rival dyads (left panel), foreign policy alignment shows no meaningful change in the year before the apology, suggesting that relations were not already deteriorating before the gesture was made. In the apology year, alignment remains near its prior level. By the year after, however, alignment declines, consistent with a backfire effect: the apology is followed by a modest worsening of relations rather than an improvement. The sequence matters. Because the decline follows the apology rather than preceding it, the pattern suggests that the apology itself activates hostile interpretive frames rather than merely reflecting a relationship that was already souring.

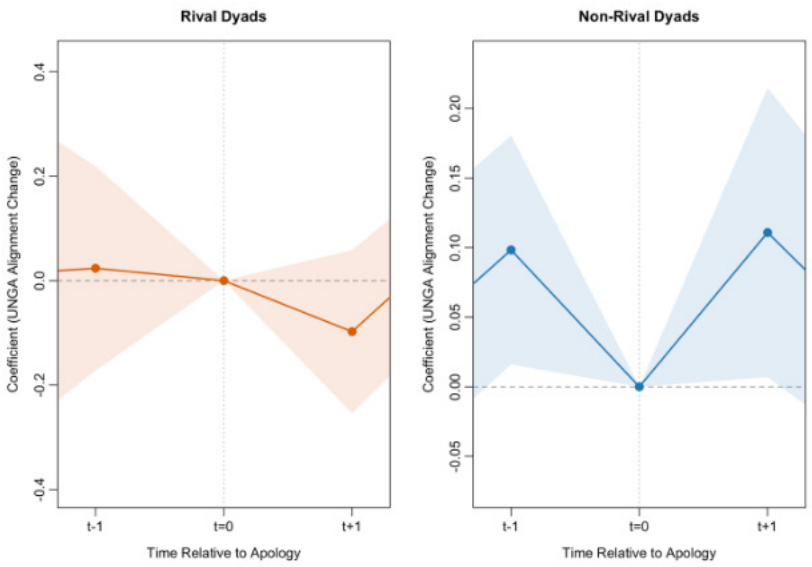

Figure 5: The impact of international apologies in rival dyads (left panel, orange) and non-rival dyads (right panel, blue)
Note: Coefficients represent estimated changes in bilateral UNGA voting alignment at each time point relative to the apology year (t = 0). Shaded bands represent 95% confidence intervals; intervals that include zero indicate that the estimated effect is not statistically distinguishable from no change. The dashed horizontal line marks zero.

In non-rival dyads (right panel), the pattern differs in a revealing way. Alignment is already improving in the year before the apology, indicating that relations were on an upward trajectory before the gesture was issued. This is consistent with the sequencing argument developed earlier: leaders tend to apologize when conditions are already favorable, meaning that apologies consolidate cooperative trends already underway rather than creating them from scratch. In the year after the apology, alignment returns to a level comparable to the pre-apology period, indicating that cooperation is sustained following the gesture.

Taken together, the two panels tell a coherent story. In rivalries, apologies are followed by modest deterioration. In non-rival dyads, apologies occur within already-improving relationships and are associated with sustained cooperation. These contrasting trajectories reinforce the broader argument: apologies do not produce uniform effects but are interpreted through the lens of the prior relationship.

These regularities generate specific expectations for the US-Japan case. The rivalry finding implies that if the US-Japan relationship had remained adversarial after 1945, the absence of apology would be unremarkable — merely the predicted outcome. But the relationship did not remain adversarial. The alignment finding implies that once the dyad moved into durable cooperation, through the security treaty, economic integration, and decades of diplomatic coordination, the probability of apology should have risen substantially. And the effects finding implies that in a non-rival context,

an apology would be expected to consolidate rather than disrupt cooperation, lowering the foreign-policy risk. In short, the cross-national evidence predicts that the US-Japan dyad is precisely the kind of case in which apology should emerge. The question is why it has not.

4. The US-Japan Case: A Theoretically Important Deviation

The cross-national patterns generate a clear prediction for the US-Japan dyad: apology should be likely, and if issued, should consolidate cooperation. The two countries transitioned rapidly from total war to a durable partnership through occupation-era reforms, a peace settlement, and the gradual deepening of a security alliance anchored in shared interests. The relationship between the US and Japan warmed long ago, and mutual expectations of reciprocity have remained stable for decades. On every dimension captured by the cross-national models, including rivalry termination, foreign policy alignment, and duration of cooperation, this dyad falls squarely in the zone where apologies typically occur (Diehl, Goertz, and Gallegos 2021). An apology from the US could, in principle, serve as a consolidation function. In a non-rival dyad, an apology is unlikely to be interpreted as a sign of weakness and more likely to be seen as a reaffirmation of cooperation. It could validate the recipient state's historical narrative, reduce the risk of grievance-driven backsliding, and symbolically lock in mutual trust. These are the roles that apologies play in other already-peaceful relationships, such as between Germany and France, the United Kingdom and Ireland, Japan and Australia. Yet no apology has been offered. This deviation is not random; it is produced by identifiable mechanisms that interact to override the expected outcome. What makes the case analytically valuable is that it isolates the conditions under which the general logic of apology politics breaks down. These are conditions that cross-national correlations alone cannot reveal. The following sections trace four such mechanisms.

5. Why No Apology? Explaining the Deviant Case

5.1. US domestic politics and public opinion

First, the dominant American narrative frames the atomic bombings as essential to ending the war and saving American lives. This reading is embedded in school curricula (Linenthal and Engelhardt 1996), public commemorations, museum exhibitions such as the Smithsonian's contested Enola Gay display (Harwit 2012), veterans' organizations, and presidential rhetoric across party lines (Lind 2016b). Under this narrative, issuing an apology would effectively repudiate a decision widely regarded as "just": one that avoided a costly invasion and honored the sacrifices of the Greatest Generation. The political risks for leaders considering apology are thus highly visible: leaders anticipate criticism that apology dishonors veterans, invites historical revisionism, and exposes the US to open-ended demands for reparations.

This dynamic is not unique to the US-Japan case, though it manifests with particular intensity there.

Japan's own apologies to South Korea for colonial-era abuses, including forced labor and the "comfort women" system, have generated recurrent domestic backlash within Japan, with conservative politicians periodically walking back earlier statements of remorse (Lind 2008). The Japan-South Korea case illustrates a broader pattern: when a historical grievance is closely tied to national identity and narratives of wartime sacrifice, domestic opposition to apology remains strong even decades after the events in question. What distinguishes the US-Japan nuclear case is the additional layer of strategic and doctrinal significance attached to nuclear weapons, which compounds the domestic constraints observed in other apology-resistant dyads.

Survey data over eight decades reveal both change and continuity in how Americans view the atomic bombings and, by extension, the political feasibility of apology. In 1945, Gallup found that roughly 85 percent of Americans approved the bombings (Gallup 2016), reflecting the wartime framing of the attacks as a necessary measure to end the conflict quickly and save lives. That consensus has gradually eroded but not reversed. By 2005, a majority (57 percent) still approved of the decision (Gallup 2005). A decade later, a poll reported that 56 percent continued to view the bombings as justified (Pew Research Center 2015). In 2025, however, opinion had diversified further: only 35 percent now described the bombings as justified; 31 percent said they were not; and 33 percent were unsure (Pew Research Center 2025). The growing proportion of undecided respondents suggests rising ambivalence, particularly among younger Americans, who express more skepticism than older cohorts. Yet despite this generational shift, opinion has not consolidated in favor of apology. Although it is possible that some undecided respondents might favor an apology, the political calculus that matters is the one leaders face: in a climate of divided opinion, risk-averse politicians treat ambiguity as a reason to maintain the status quo rather than as a mandate for action. The domestic calculus has changed in degree, not in kind: public opinion has softened but has not reached the threshold at which an apology would be politically feasible.

5.2. Japanese public opinion

Second, the distribution of public preferences in Japan reduces external pressure for a US apology. Although demands from survivors of the bombings and certain political figures remain clear and persistent, broader public attitudes have shown considerable accommodation toward non-apology gestures. A 2015 Pew Research Center survey found that 79 percent of Japanese respondents said the atomic bombings were unjustified, compared with only 14 percent who said they were justified (Newsweek 2020). Yet a 2016 poll conducted ahead of President Barack Obama's visit to Hiroshima found that a majority of Japanese (61%) believed no apology was necessary for the visit (Time 2016). After the visit, most respondents viewed Obama's remarks, which honored the dead and emphasized shared lessons of peace, as appropriate; 98 percent of Japanese rated his visit favorably (Lind 2016b).

Japanese leaders, too, have emphasized forward-looking cooperation and regional security priorities. In this environment, Tokyo has rarely made a US apology a condition for alliance management or foreign policy coordination. For Washington, this heterogeneity in Japanese opinion lowers the

expected international payoff from apology: if Japanese audiences already view visits, commemorations, and disarmament rhetoric as sufficient, the marginal value of an apology is minimal. US leaders can therefore achieve alliance objectives without incurring the domestic costs of apology-making.

It is worth noting that Japan's own experience as both a recipient and a giver of apologies may further reduce domestic pressure on Washington. Japan's protracted and politically fraught efforts to apologize to South Korea, marked by cycles of apology, retraction, and renewed grievance, have demonstrated to Japanese citizens the domestic costs and diplomatic risks that apologies entail (Dudden 2008). Having witnessed their own government's difficulties with apology, including the political fallout from the 2015 comfort women agreement, Japanese citizens may be more sympathetic to the American position and less inclined to insist on an apology from Washington. In this sense, Japan's own apology experience functions as a feedback loop that further reduces external pressure on the United States.

5.3. Security interests

Third, strategic interdependence makes both governments risk-averse toward historical grievances that could distract from security objectives. The US-Japan alliance remains central to deterrence against North Korea, balancing China's growing capabilities, coordinating intelligence, and sustaining defense-industrial cooperation. The US depends on forward basing and access in Japan; Japan depends on US extended deterrence and joint operational planning. Given these mutual dependencies, both governments have strong incentives to avoid symbolic gestures, such as apologies, that might inflame nationalist sentiment or complicate military coordination.

The broader US Asia-Pacific strategy has long emphasized strategic alignment over historical reckoning. US policymakers see unresolved memory issues as distractions from the pressing need to manage regional threats, and they have consistently urged allies to "downplay what divides them and play up areas of agreement" (Pempel 2017). In a security environment dominated by North Korea's nuclear program and China's regional assertiveness, reopening the question of wartime responsibility risks diverting attention from alliance management. From Washington's perspective, symbolic reconciliation is less urgent than ensuring operational readiness and strategic cohesion.

Comparative experience reinforces this logic. The France–West Germany rapprochement advanced through shared alignment within the Western alliance against the Soviet Union, economic integration, and symbolic acts of reconciliation, without the need for an explicit apology (Lind 2008). The mechanism is similar: when external threats dominate the agenda, leaders prioritize policies that yield material reassurance and foreign policy alignment. Under such conditions, potentially divisive gestures are often deferred or replaced by lower-risk substitutes such as joint ceremonies and leader visits.

5.4. The unique status of nuclear weapons

Finally, the nuclear dimension makes this case distinct from other apology episodes. The 1945 bombings occupy a dual position in US strategic identity: domestically, they are remembered as decisive in ending the war; internationally, they are embedded in the logic of postwar nuclear deterrence. An apology would therefore not be a routine act of remorse. Instead, it would question the legitimacy of the instrument underpinning US extended deterrence and broader security commitments. US declaratory policy and force posture rest on the premise that nuclear weapons deter large-scale aggression. Recasting the original use as wrongful risks delegitimizing the doctrinal foundations of current strategy and would feed ongoing debates over restraint (e.g., no-first-use) versus credibility and damage-limitation. Such a shift could embolden advocates of tighter constraints while unsettling allies who rely on the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella.

The atomic bombings are entwined with US self-understandings of technological mastery, military primacy, and responsible stewardship of international order. An apology would signal a re-narration of American power and restraint. This is the terrain in which norms against nuclear use—the "nuclear taboo"—and national identity claims intersect (Tannenwald 2007). Moreover, US allies' security continues to depend on US extended nuclear deterrence. An American apology would introduce a tension between condemning past nuclear use and sustaining a credible threat of future use on an ally's behalf. Reassurance and credibility are central to alliance management, and any gesture that undermines them carries strategic costs that extend well beyond the bilateral relationship. These concerns are not abstract. Japan is currently expanding its defense capabilities, including plans to double its defense budget by 2027, and the two governments are actively negotiating the terms of burden-sharing, base realignment, and deeper interoperability. An apology introduced into this environment could shift the framing of the alliance from forward-looking strategic partnership to backward-looking historical grievance, complicating negotiations that require mutual confidence.

Taken together, these four mechanisms explain why the US has not issued an apology despite meeting the structural conditions under which international apologies typically occur. On the supply side, American administrations face concentrated domestic costs and uncertain foreign gains; the nuclear dimension amplifies both. On the demand side, Japanese preferences are heterogeneous and the alliance delivers most of what both governments want without an apology. At the systemic level, strategic competition with China and persistent threats from North Korea elevate the value of foreign policy cohesion over historical reckoning. The international gains of apologizing are low relative to the costs, producing the observed deviation.

Apologies are not the only way for states to address historical grievances. High-level visits that center on mourning and acknowledgement of civilian suffering can serve as lower-risk substitutes. They provide a public focal point, validate the dignity of victims, and signal restraint going forward without the domestic backlash or legal complications tied to an apology. The US-Japan case illustrates this. Obama's 2016 visit to Hiroshima was framed as mourning rather than apology. The message was remembrance and "never again," carefully calibrated to speak to Japanese audiences

without reopening debates in the US. The reception confirmed the viability of acknowledgement as a substitute for apology. Hiroshima's mayor called the visit "a historic first step" toward nuclear disarmament (The Guardian 2016a). Tsuboi Sunao, a 91-year-old survivor, embraced Obama after his speech, telling reporters: "We are not asking for an apology. All we want is to see him lay flowers at the peace park and lower his head in silence" (The Guardian 2016a). Abe subsequently visited Pearl Harbor in December 2016, creating a reciprocal framework of mutual acknowledgement that further consolidated the alliance without requiring either side to formally apologize (The Guardian 2016c). Bilateral cooperation continued to deepen in the years that followed, suggesting that acknowledgement without apology was sufficient to sustain, and even strengthen, the relationship. In this sense, acknowledgement replaced apology as the preferred instrument of reconciliation under alliance constraints.

6. Conclusion

This paper has pursued two related but asymmetric objectives. The first was to establish a descriptive empirical baseline: international apologies are not randomly distributed across relationships but cluster in dyads that have already moved beyond rivalry toward cooperation. Cross-national evidence suggests a consistent pattern: apologies are less likely in rivalries, more common after relations improve, and associated with different trajectories in rival and non-rival dyads. These findings challenge the common assumption that apologies are catalysts of reconciliation and suggest instead that they function as capstones of it.

The second and primary objective was to explain why the US-Japan case deviates from this pattern. If apologies tend to follow warming, an American apology for Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be plausible in a stable, decades-long alliance. The absence of such an apology is explained by four interlocking mechanisms: (1) persistent domestic backlash risks in the US, rooted in the narrative that the bombings ended the war and saved lives; (2) heterogeneous demand in Japan, where survivors and some leaders seek apology but the broader public accepts acknowledgement; (3) a shared interest in maintaining alliance cohesion, which discourages public diplomacy tools that could polarize either society or complicate operational cooperation; and (4) the unique status of nuclear weapons in US strategic doctrine and identity, which elevates the costs of apology far above those in ordinary historical disputes. These mechanisms create a compound constraint that no single factor would produce alone. It is not merely that the US public opposes apology, or that Japan does not demand one, or that the alliance discourages it, or that nuclear weapons raise the stakes. It is that all four operate simultaneously and reinforce one another.

In place of apology, the dyad has institutionalized lower-risk substitutes, including high-level visits, commemorations, and language of shared mourning. These rituals create focal moments for mutual recognition, validate victim dignity, and communicate restraint while avoiding the political and legal hazards of apology. Obama's 2016 visit to Hiroshima exemplifies this mode. The cases of Japan-

South Korea and France-Germany suggest that this mode is not exceptional but recurrent: states routinely navigate the tension between historical reckoning and strategic imperatives by substituting lower-cost gestures for formal apology.

Two broader implications follow. First, policymakers should not overestimate the power of apology to transform adversarial relations. Where rivalry persists, audiences interpret apology through entrenched cognitive frames, often discounting or even reversing its intended meaning. Where relations have already improved, the need for apology diminishes precisely because cooperation provides its own reassurance. Second, the US-Japan case demonstrates that descriptive regularities, however consistent, can be overridden by case-specific mechanisms. The four constraints identified here interact in ways that aggregate analysis cannot capture, producing a deviation that is predictable in hindsight yet invisible to cross-national data alone. This is the value of pairing broad empirical patterns with intensive case analysis: the former identifies where to look, and the latter explains what is actually happening. The finding carries implications beyond the nuclear context: any historical grievance closely tied to foundational strategic doctrines or core national identity claims may prove similarly resistant to apology, even within otherwise cooperative relationships. Carefully calibrated public diplomacy gestures, including leader visits, statements of mourning, joint memorials, can deliver most of the stabilizing benefits associated with apology at a fraction of the domestic costs, and may represent the realistic ceiling of reconciliation in strategically constrained dyads.

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