

Warlordism, Sovereignty, and the State in Eurasia

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Where do warlords come from, and how do they go about their business? In his magisterial portrait of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean, Fernand Braudel commented on the limits of Philip II's power in Spain. Even the most unobservant traveler, Braudel wrote, would have noted the vast differences upon crossing the border between Castile and Aragon. In the former, he found the well-governed lands of the crown, clearly under the power of the king. In the latter, he found semi-independent lords, demanding a great deal of their subjects and delivering little to their sovereign, ensconced in fortified estates and thumbing their nose at Philip. But the source of their power had little to do with the productivity of their lands or the number of men under arms. It was largely a function of geography. Located only a short distance from the French border, the lords of Aragon knew that Philip was at their mercy: Should the king attempt to rein them in, they could simply step aside and allow the French to march on Madrid.¹

The early modern Mediterranean was a paradise for warlords, pirates, bandits, and corsairs. In a world of overlapping empires, congealing nation-states, and globalizing trade, the opportunities for personal enrichment were many. But Braudel's chief insight is that the success of warlords was, at base, due to their unique position as frontiersmen. They were creatures of the borderlands, growing up in regions where states and empires were both needy and inexpert: where they had difficulty extending their own power and where they required assistance in preventing the catastrophe of foreign invasion. Warlords were uniquely gifted boundary-crossers, conducting both violent and non-violent transactions across political, cultural, and economic dividing lines. Despite the

popular image of warlords as sword-swinging barbarians ruling despotically from usurped thrones, the really successful ones turned out to have something that everyone wanted: the ability to serve as middlemen in complex exchanges across uncertain boundaries while, in the process, reaping some profit for themselves.

Today, “warlord” is a general term of disapprobation for any allegedly illegitimate political leader who uses large-scale, organized violence for private gain. Over the last two decades, the term has been used to describe political and military actors in Chechnya, Georgia, Somalia, Liberia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, and many other locales. But how precisely do warlords operate? What accounts for their success? And how do states manage (or fail) to assert greater control over them?

This article provides an account of warlord behavior that focuses on their position as arbitrageurs. They and their organizations possess certain traits which allow them to take advantage of market gradients and profit from their position on the frontiers of state authority. The first section briefly surveys the literature on warlords, a subject that has received increasing attention in recent years because of the expansion of organized, non-state violence under weak and failing regimes. This section identifies the key analytical questions to have emerged in this literature and pulls out some of the research questions of critical interest to political scientists. The second section puts forward a model of warlord behavior based on a minimal set of assumptions about elites at the fringes of state authority. In contrast with some important recent work in this field, the model proposed here focuses neither on the individual pathologies of warlords themselves nor on ideational and structural features such as legitimacy or resource availability. Warlords succeed not because they are particularly ruthless—although many are that, too—but

because they have learned to accommodate themselves to the liminal environments in which they arise. The third section uses the cases of Eurasia's unresolved border wars and the rise of warlord states² as an illustration of this account in explaining where warlord situations are likely to develop, who is likely to become a warlord, and how states deal with them once they have consolidated their power. The fourth section concludes with policy implications for the Eurasian cases.

I. Warlordism in History and Theory

The term “warlord” has never signified one concept. At times it has been used to describe a form of political organization antecedent to the modern state; at other times it has been seen as a mode of legitimizing state power or discrediting rival claimants to authority. The first appearance of the term in English dates only to 1856. It seems to have been coined by Ralph Waldo Emerson, in an essay on the evolution of aristocratic prerogatives and centralized authority in England. “The selfishness of the nobles comes in aid of the interest of the nation to require signal merit,” Emerson wrote. “Piracy and war gave place to trade, politics and letters; the war-lord to the law-lord; . . . the privilege was kept, whilst the means of obtaining it were changed.”³ A short time later, German writers came to use the equivalent term, Kriegsherr, to describe one of the sources of legitimacy—the power to make war successfully—of the newly crowned emperor, Wilhelm I. The concept soon migrated beyond Europe. By the 1920s, it had become part of the standard vocabulary of Chinese politics. Republican Chinese writers, critical of the growing power of regional governors, used the newly coined term junfa to decry the dispersion of

political power away from the republican government.⁴ Despite these varied uses, in both China and Europe, the label came to have clearly negative connotations. A warlord was an illegitimate ruler bent on using force to extract ill-gotten gains from local populations, with little regard to the broader national interest.

Sasha Lezhnev, who has written one of the few comparative studies of the warlord phenomenon, defines modern warlords in a similarly normative frame: as “globalized gangsters”—“powerful actors in weak states who base their control almost solely on rule by force for the overwhelming purpose of personal financial gain and glory rather than mass ideological struggle.” Lezhnev goes on to enumerate several definitional criteria. These include personal greed as the warlord’s central motivation, a “psycho-social makeup” of low education and military experience, the political and economic environment of a weak state, the use of brutal methods of warfare, and an ability to mobilize resources effectively. Such figures as Charles Taylor in Liberia, Foday Sankoh, in Sierra Leone, Jokhar Dudaev in Chechnya, and Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia are cited as examples.⁵ Kimberly Marten has taken issue with such value-laden definitions and instead proposed that warlords should be seen as trained military leaders in weak and failing states who use charisma and patronage ties for personal enrichment and, in the process, encourage further political and economic fragmentation.⁶ Other writers have seen warlords as inconstant negotiating partners, potential “spoilers” in peace agreements, political actors motivated more by greed than by grievance, selfish leaders whose main interest is personal survival, or claimants to sovereignty who lie midway between bandit and state-builder.⁷ As in the past, no single definition of warlordism has gained wide currency, but most writers who deploy the term do so with normative

intentions: to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate governance, self-interested action from that which considers the common good, or avaricious behavior from the merely self-regarding.

If definitions are legion, there seems to be greater consensus on the issue of where warlordism is likely to appear. Three major explanations stand out. One is that warlordism arises where state authority is weak. Warlords are thus prior to the state in both historical and analytical senses: They are the forms of social organization that the modern state was meant to supplant, and when they arise in the modern period—such as contemporary Somalia, Afghanistan or Iraq—they do so because of the effective collapse of central state authority. States may eventually come to subcontract the administration of violence to these local actors: to control an unruly border region, to supervise colonization beyond the metropole or to protect a frontier or menace a potential enemy on the other side of the border. In such scenarios, the potential advantage to the state is that franchising violence can be less expensive than centralizing it. But the disadvantages are obvious. If able warlords are functioning in areas where state power is feeble, they may from time to time challenge the state itself—becoming, in other words, local state-makers rather than franchisees.⁸

A second view is that warlords offer an alternative social structure, one which uniquely accords with the traditions, needs, and desires of the local populations that they claim to control. Warlords seek to offer one or more private goods which are superior to those putatively offered by the state or other suppliers. In other contexts, a warlord may be the sole provider of a public good, either because state structures are weak and ineffective, or because the warlord has essentially cornered the market, either by

restricting access to state providers or undermining their effectiveness. The public good may be concrete—such as health care or education—or rather more abstract, such as providing an environment of security and enforcement of contracts in an environment in which the state’s ability to provide either is absent.⁹

A third view sees warlords not so much as violent franchisees or as social service providers, but as essentially “violent entrepreneurs.”¹⁰ They seek to control some local resource—an extractive industry such as timber or diamonds, for example—and use that resource to enrich themselves and their subordinates. Some warlords may exercise control over easily extractable resources, such as surface minerals and timber, while others may develop extensive economic and industrial capacities, such as controlling mining or large-scale agriculture. Warlords may also develop the rudiments of state structures for managing such resources, but their aims and the extent of their power are both derivative of their economic resources. In an odd recapitulation of Marxist visions of the state, on this view warlords exist within a particular constellation of the forces of production. The relations of production which arise out of such forces—between the warlord and the local population, or the warlord and the central state—are dependent on the nature, wealth, and other features of the material base.¹¹

It is impossible to gainsay the cruelty and selfishness of leaders such as Taylor, Sankoh, and Milosevic. But today, ad hoc definitions of warlord behavior are problematic in that they rely mainly on identifying political figures whom the international community sees as illegitimate, and then working inductively toward allegedly common features that unite them. Even in analytical contexts, the label tends to be used to condemn certain political leaders and their depravities, rather than asking whether

warlordism is a phenomenon independent of the question of international approval. Our enemies are warlords, the logic goes, while our friends—including those who engage in barbarous behavior from time to time—are inchoate statesmen. Moreover, reading warlord behavior from a limited set of contemporary cases also fails to put warlordism in its broader social and historical context, blinding researchers to the way in which modern-day warlordism parallels past cases.

Moreover, it is relatively easy to find real-world cases that seem to fit the models of warlord origins detailed above. Local warlordism arose in Iraq only after the collapse of the central Iraqi state following the U.S.-led invasion of 2003. Presumably, if the pre-2003 Iraqi state were still functioning, local violent actors would have little scope for organization. The same point could be made about the collapse of the Afghan government in 1979, the end of the central Somali government in 1991, and the brief collapse of the Albanian government in 1997. Similarly, the alternative public goods provided by such groups as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—from hospitals to schools to simple contract enforcement—have often been cited as reasons for the relative success of these armed groups in southern Lebanon, Palestine, and Colombia. The financing of violence through control of timber production, the diamond trade, oil revenues, and other resources has similarly fueled the growth of local violent elites throughout parts of sub-Saharan Africa and southeast Asia.

While there are plenty of cases that match up with these accounts, they seem inadequate as part of a general theory of warlordism. In the first place, warlordism seems to arise in very different environments. If warlordism is a single political and social phenomenon, what accounts for its variegated forms? Is there some feature of warlord

behavior that is common across the many geographical, economic, political, and historical environments in which it seems to occur? Moreover, existing accounts of warlordism focus almost exclusively on the demand side of the equation: the demand of the overburdened state for franchisees to which it can devolve responsibility for organized violence; the demand by local citizens for protection or public goods; the demand by world markets for the extractive resources that warlords provide; or the demand by external patrons for local clients who can provide stability and a modicum of security in a war-torn region.

Yet the supply side of warlord behavior is usually left unexplored. Given that the availability of purveyors of violence is usually rather high—potentially, everyone with a weapon and ambition—how is it that some individuals and groups engage in warlordism while others remain low-level, opportunistic bandits? Why do some thugs achieve warlord status, ruling over territory, people, and productive resources, while others fade from the scene or become lowly subordinates of more powerful figures? How does the market for violent enforcement—both the demand and the supply sides—actually work?

II. Warlordism as Arbitrage

Let us imagine an ideal-typical political and military actor who is neither a member of a recognized state elite nor an opportunistic thief—a figure who falls midway between a roving bandit and a stationary one, in Mancur Olson's terms.¹² Such actors neither overtly seek the status of legitimate statesmen (or do so inexpertly when they try), nor do they think of themselves as having common cause with ordinary thieves and

highwaymen, whose activities they might try to restrict. A warlord is a unique economic, political, and strategic actor with certain peculiar characteristics, operating within a distinct social environment. He (or almost never, she) is not only a subcontractor or franchisee of state authority, although he may take on these roles intermittently. He is not a simple opportunist, plunderer or bandit. He does not roam widely but rather seeks to establish some degree of stability in his domain.

Historically, warlords arise not simply in areas where state power is weak, but rather at the intersection of different kinds of political, economic, and cultural environments. They are, in several senses, arbitrageurs. In its economic sense, arbitrage is a profit-making activity which arises from an actor's taking advantage of market imperfections, specifically differential pricing (which itself may be the result of imperfect information, supply/demand differences in different sectors or structurally distinct markets). Most simply, an arbitrageur buys at one price in one market and sells at a higher price in another market. The basic condition for arbitrage is that the same asset must commonly trade at different prices across a market boundary. (In more complex transactions, arbitrageurs can also take advantage of differential pricing in futures markets as against current market prices.)

Warlords operate in similar ways. They can only profit from extractive industries or local resources if they can get these goods to markets where the price is higher than the costs of exploiting the resource in the first place. They can reap rewards as violent subcontractors only if the market value of their services differs in different realms: the price (financial, moral, and political) that state authorities are willing to pay for their services versus the price that their own clients demand for continued loyalty. The market

gradients can be drawn along a number of boundaries: between different spheres of state authority, between different states, between different religious or cultural groups, even between different patrons. The goods that warlords trade across these markets can be straightforward physical assets, such as timber, weapons or drugs, or more conceptual ones such as legitimacy or contract enforcement. But in each instance, warlords arise among individuals and groups that, through the use of violent instruments, ensure their own profit by manipulating market differentials.

The subsections below detail some of the conditions that allow this particular kind of arbitrage to take place:

Demand for Goods

Arbitrage depends fundamentally on demand for goods in different markets. Warlords exist in part because they provide some good which is demanded by a local population, or extract a good locally which is in demand in another market. While a stationary bandit may engage only in resource extraction for his own gain, warlords are more often talented redistributors: extracting rents while also providing some set of public goods. Successful warlords with durable power are not those who behave like simple bandits. Rather, they are those who understand the dynamics of demand in several markets and position themselves as key suppliers.

Demand has another dimension as well. Early modern states came into being, in part, because of the shift from roving to stationary bandits as agents of wealth extraction and redistribution. Tax-farming and direct taxation provided revenue for warmaking,

which in turn expanded the domain that the state considered its legitimate purview.¹³ Yet the relative costs of warmaking are today cheaper than ever before. Many soldiers armed with inexpensive weaponry—or a select few expensive weapons—can wreak havoc on modern militaries. In many areas, warlords take advantage of this situation. Since they need neither large-scale public revenues to finance a war nor take on the full and expensive responsibilities of the modern redistributive state, they have little need to tax and spend on the model of statebuilders of earlier ages. From the public's perspective, those to whom little is given require little of their governments but to be left alone.

Market Gradients

Warlords take advantage of geographies of power and markets. In its simplest sense, this geographic gradient can mark off two different markets for a particular asset. Timber extracted in one market can be sold at a profit in another. Diamonds mined with forced or minimally remunerated labor in one area can be marketed at a considerable mark-up in another.

But these gradients can be more conceptual than concrete. A warlord may seek some degree of external legitimacy abroad—such as by cooperating with peacekeeping forces or portraying himself as a critical power-broker in a war-torn region—and then market that legitimacy domestically. A warlord may establish himself as the protector of a market boundary, as in the case of the lords of Aragon cited at the top of this essay: In that instance, warlords were marketing their role as purveyors of security on two sides of an international frontier.

State Parasitism

Warlords are not simple opportunists or franchisees, such as privateers. Historically, privateers were mobile businessmen, such as ship captains and traders, who were given leave by a sovereign to conduct violent attacks on competitors—usually ships flying flags of an enemy state—when the opportunity arose, in exchange for keeping all or part of the loot for themselves. By disrupting the competitor’s business, the privateer was able to provide a service to the franchiser while also keeping whatever residual profit might be gained from the act of disruption itself.

Warlords can certainly act in the interests of a recognized state on occasion, but when they do so they are something closer to independent contractors rather than franchisees. They act in concert with state institutions when doing so is in their own interest, not in order to seek the imprimatur of the state. Where warlords become state-makers, it is not because of their superior firepower but because of their ability, through whatever means, to gain a sense of allegiance and loyalty among local actors, who depend on their patronage and security umbrella.

Indeed, warlord behavior has historically been not an antecedent or alternative to the modern state but rather a parasite upon it. In many contexts, warlords have been concomitants of state power, especially in states that are overburdened by the costs of policing, ensuring security, managing internal rivals or fending off external threats. Rather than monopolizing violence, both premodern and modern states have routinely found ways of subcontracting it: to feudal princes, regional militias, “martial” ethnic

groups, and friendly guerrillas. It is these subcontractors who, having loosened the bonds of state control, eventually become the historical caste known as warlords. They are, in other words, frequently agents who have lost their principals.

An important point follows from this dimension of warlordism-as-arbitrage: Warlords do not always object to the creation of functioning state institutions. Indeed, a warlord-as-arbitrageur may well depend on the existence of a formal border which separates zones of economic activity, or boundaries of competence between different formal state institutions. It is, in fact, these very boundaries, marking off different markets, which allow the warlord to go about his work. Formal frontiers, state institutions, and gradients of legitimacy are not inimical to warlord interests; in many instances, they facilitate warlord behavior.

Social and Cultural Competence

Warlords are intensely local actors. They arise in particular socio-cultural environments and deploy their knowledge of the social, political, economic, and military terrain to their own advantage. They often also possess some degree of social competence which marks them off as respected and potentially powerful members of a local elite. They may hail from a respected clan or family, or they may trace their lineage back to a respected figure from the mythic past.

Critically, warlords are also often multi-competent. They possess certain social and cultural skills from different geographic or cultural domains. They and their associates may be multilingual. They may move between sectarian or religious

boundaries, if not in terms of personal practice then simply in terms of their ability to deal with and strike bargains with actors across social divides.

III. Warlords and Sovereignty in Eurasia

All warlords are secessionists to the degree that they claim some degree of sovereignty for themselves and their associates over a given territory. Only some, however, actively seek to legitimize their status in domestic and international spheres, by proclaiming independence, holding elections and referenda, crafting narratives of the past that glorify themselves as leaders of national liberation movements, and creating the accoutrements of state-like status, from flags to national anthems. But differences in the legitimation strategies of warlord elites should not obscure the common logic that underlies their behavior. While some warlords are adept at using the language of international legitimacy, sovereignty, and national self-determination, these terms are often simply ways of protecting a warlord's ability to determine the terms of arbitrage.

The cases of former Soviet secessionist entities and the warlord elites who have built them are illustrative of these themes. The post-Soviet order was not so much the natural outcome of nations' striving for independence, but rather of the international community's capacity to tolerate particular kinds of secessionists but not others. In the end, the narratives of successful secessionists—Moldova, Ukraine, the Baltic republics, and the states of central Asia and the south Caucasus—were validated through international recognition and membership in international institutions. Those of the unrecognized regimes—Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh—

have been viewed by outsiders as desperate attempts to justify the whims of warlord separatists.

Until well into the early 2000s, however, it was difficult for a visitor to tell the difference between life in a warlord state and life in a recognized one, at least outside the national capitals. Electricity was often in short supply. Roads went unrepaired. Government was capricious and politics intertwined with corrupt business practices. It is no denigration of any group's right to self-determination to make the simple observation that state weakness, arbitrary governance, and economic uncertainty had little to do with territorial status. The effects of these political and social ills were experienced equally by citizens across Eurasia, regardless of whether their countries were real or imagined.

The postcommunist wars that produced today's warlord states were highly complex affairs, involving an array of different actors and affecting the interests of major global and regional powers, from the European Union to Russia and the United States. They all sprang from a complicated mix of ethnic grievances, disputes over territory, and struggles for power among old and new elites, all within the context of political transformation, ideological change, economic transition, and state collapse. They were also wrapped up in basic questions of legitimacy: Who was to be the spokesperson for old nations and new states? Which claims to independence were justified and which spurious? What forms of self-determination—from local autonomy to outright independence—would the international community recognize as appropriate for one minority group but deny to another? With the exception of the second Chechen war, which began in 1999, the military side of most of the conflicts had ended by the late 1990s. Peacekeeping missions and negotiating forums were created under the aegis of the

United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Union.

In none of these areas, however, has a real resolution yet been achieved. Functionally independent but unrecognized states have grown up over the last decade or more; one has its own currency, three have their own postal systems, all have their own foreign policies, economies, parliaments, presidents, and armies. The results of the postcommunist wars have been a combination of relatively powerful unrecognized states and rather dysfunctional recognized ones.

The dynamics of war and postwar negotiations in each of these disputes are in many ways unique. The reasons for the violence, the kinds of outcome acceptable to the belligerents, and the form of future statehood palatable to external mediators differ in each instance. Still, there is a common feature to all of these disputes. In each, the rhetoric of ethnic confrontation and minority rights covers up the basic conundrum that has prevented these conflicts from moving toward a final resolution: the fact that no party with decision-making power is sufficiently hurt by the status quo that it has an incentive to push forward with a real settlement. The dynamics of arbitrage—the advantages of marketing different kinds of goods across market gradients—have been powerful disincentives to resolution. Or to put the argument less charitably, plenty of individuals on all sides benefit from the current state of affairs to such a degree that irresolution, and the profound weakness of legitimate state institutions that results, is preferable to a stable, defined final status. All parties to the disputes, in one form or another, have an interest in maintaining the terms of arbitrage exactly as they have been for most of the last decade, since the end of outright hostilities in the early and mid-1990s.

Each of the Eurasian wars had similar mid-range causes. Conflicts usually involved an ethnic minority or cultural group which was distinct from the majority population in the country or republic as a whole, and which had enjoyed a relatively privileged position during the Communist period. Lines of dispute also usually ran along the borders of ethnically defined administrative subunits. Indeed, the greatest predictor of the likelihood of armed conflict in the immediate postcommunist period was whether an ethnic minority enjoyed some form of territorial autonomy before the Communist regime began to weaken. Those that did were far more likely to have at their disposal institutional resources that could engender social mobilization and even collective violence. Minorities that controlled existing territorial subunits were also more likely to be seen by central government as an existential threat. That, in turn, meant that governments were more likely to use force early on against these minorities than against those that did not control a defined piece of territory.

The real puzzle about the postcommunist wars is not why they arose. In a context of sudden regime change and radical economic transformation, some violence was probably inevitable. Rather, the striking thing is how long disputes have wound on even after the fighting stopped, despite the efforts of international mediators. Yet these conflicts are “unresolved” only in the sense that the international community is unprepared to recognize the outcome of the military confrontations of the 1990s. In all of the Eurasian wars, there were rather clear military winners. The recognized states were defeated by a combination of secessionists and some outside power, in most instances the Russian Federation. But the fact that these military victories have not been transformed into clear political ones is no more than a function of the orientation of the international

community: There was a clear “right to self-determination” at work in the 1990s, but that right applied only to secessionist movements that arose within the highest-level administrative subunit of existing Communist federations. For less well-endowed minorities—those that lived within “autonomous republics” or “autonomous regions” rather than simply “republics,” or that had no existing territorial status at all—outside powers were generally unwilling to support or recognize de facto separation.

All of this points to the central irony of the postcommunist wars. In every instance in which a “rebel” or “secessionist” group won on the battlefield—Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh—full victory has been blocked by the international community’s unwillingness to add the imprimatur of political legitimacy to the military outcome. The cynicism that such an outcome has engendered among both political winners and losers is hard to overestimate. Recognized governments are wary of granting significant territorial autonomy to minorities for fear that such a scheme is merely the first step toward full independence. Unrecognized “rebels” are reluctant to settle for autonomy, in any case, since they have already proven their ability to fulfill one of the base-level requirements of statehood: ability to exercise sovereign control over a defined piece of real estate. The postcommunist world thus has a clear “stateness” problem, but not quite in the sense that Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan intended.¹⁴ The recognized countries have too little stateness simply because the unrecognized ones have managed to garner too much.

Central authorities in Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan frequently complain about the economic benefits that accrue to the warlord governments. But those benefits also flow to the institutions and individuals ostensibly responsible for resolving the

conflicts. The links between corrupt central governments and the secessionist regions, especially in Georgia and Moldova, have further imperiled already weak state structures while enriching those who claim to be looking after state interests. For example, the illegal trade with Russia benefits people in both South Ossetia and Georgia proper. The South Ossetian government receives money from transit taxes, that is, from the Georgian perspective, smuggling; in turn, Georgian authorities, especially the police and interior ministry, are able to take a cut by exacting fines from truck drivers who carry the transited goods onto Georgian-controlled highways.

The unrecognized states, beyond benefiting from the weakness of the recognized ones, have also worked to foster a sense of loyalty and identity among their small populations. (The total population of all the Eurasian secessionist zones is probably under one million.) New national festivals have been inaugurated. History curricula have been redesigned to highlight the citizens of the secessionist regions as the indigenous inhabitants of their territory. Local intellectuals have also worked, as far as possible, to discover cultural or historical heroes around which semi-official cults could be built, and previous experiences of statehood, no matter how shortlived, have been marshaled to serve the cause. The wars of the 1990s are also now treated as hallowed struggles against external aggression. Children who were not even born when the national movements began in the late 1980s are now adolescents, and they have spent the last decade reading of the sacrifices of their parents and siblings in the liberation struggles of the past.¹⁵

Of course, no one has a monopoly on uncritical patriotism. There are equally tendentious versions of history and recent politics in textbooks published by the ministries of education of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. But in both the recognized

and the unrecognized states, the result of more than ten years of such propagandizing has been the creation of populations that will not easily shed the version of the truth that they have invested so much in defending. Those whose job it is to create and propagate these ideologies—university professors, academicians, school teachers, writers, and poets—have a huge personal incentive to continue doing so. Since many have progressed in their careers precisely because they came to control a set of cultural institutions divorced from the recognized central governments, they are loath to make any move that would undercut the advantages that they derive from existence inside a functionally separate state.

In the unrecognized states, throughout all levels of the administration and society, there are plenty of disincentives to settle for less than the *de jure* independence that was won *de facto* on the battlefield several years ago. In the recognized ones, no political faction is likely to agree to a settlement that will diminish the power and profits that they have spent the last decade learning to acquire through the status quo. Given the right mix of incentives—the structure of the local economy, the views of regional powers, the policies of external mediators—deadlock can become its own kind of equilibrium. And until at least one of these factors begins to change, it is difficult to see how any of the major actors in Eurasia’s conflict-ridden states and their unrecognized “rebel” regions will find settlement a preferable option to intractability.

From the perspective of the “secessionist” states, the ongoing disputes are simply another round in the sorting out of borders and identities that attended the collapse of the socialist federations. They have to do with basic questions of which new states are meant to succeed the old Soviet state and where the boundaries of those new entities should lie.

It was no more than the fiat of the international community that determined that places called Azerbaijan or Georgia should exist and that their boundaries should be those of the internal administrative divisions of the Communist-era states of which they were once a part. There was, of course, no objective reason why any of this should have worked out as it did. None of these countries could lay claim a clear “historical right” to independence that would obviously trump the right of any other cultural group; few showed themselves particularly committed to minority rights or democratic governance after they were recognized as sovereign.

The warlord republics, however, defeated the recognized governments by force of arms. They have voted for independence in referenda. They have built functioning state institutions and local economies. They have held numerous rounds of elections for public office. Some, such as Abkhazia and Transnistria, have even developed local democratic opposition movements. It is in this context that outside mediators have tried to persuade the warlord separatists that the states they have built are wholly illegitimate and that their rightful place is within the confines of three states whose flags fly at the United Nations but have not flown over the “rebel” territories for more than ten years. That may be a workable strategy in places such as Cyprus and Kosovo, where the short- and medium-term incentives of membership in and closer relations with the EU can be a powerful tool with which to break deadlocked negotiations. Even then, as Cyprus has shown, not even the carrot of EU membership is always enough. Yet in regions located on the European periphery, with few prospects of EU membership over the coming decades, if ever, it is difficult to see how the language of minority rights, negotiated settlements, and stability

of European borders can produce a stable, viable peace. So far, it has mainly produced a deep cynicism about minorities, negotiated settlements, and Europe itself.

Warlordism in each of these cases has involved precisely the dimensions of arbitrage outlined above. Secessionist elites, as well as those in central state institutions, have taken advantage of international frontiers which mark off differential markets for valuable goods and which are porous enough to permit irregular trade. They have exchanged strong relationships with external patrons, particularly the Russian Federation, for a sense of broad legitimacy on the part of local populations; since all the warlord states feel a sense of vulnerability without the imprimatur of international recognition, the elites' relationship with Moscow is seen by many locals as essential to their own security and the viability of the warlord state itself. The elites who govern the warlord republics are highly multi-competent, moving back and forth between portraying themselves as sons-of-the-soil and cosmopolitans who can easily interact with more powerful elites in Moscow. The public and private goods they have provided, from running local schools to securing public transport to outfitting an army, have allowed them to shore up some degree of performance legitimacy on the ground.

IV. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Warlordism-as-arbitrage is not an alternative to the state but rather depends on state institutions. Few warlords are genuinely interested in destroying the states they inhabit, nor are they intent on keeping the state weak in all spheres of its activity. Modern warlords may well speak the language of justice, human rights, national liberation or anti-

terrorism. But these are often also elements of arbitrage: “buying” external legitimacy by appealing to the ideologies and interests of international patrons and then “selling” that legitimacy to local populations. International or domestic strategies that deal with secessionist warlords by focusing on questions of sovereignty may well miss the central issues at stake. Establishing clear frontiers, patrolled by peacekeepers or other third parties, and delineating the elements of sovereignty, whether shared or singular, can do little, on their own, to change the basic dynamics of warlord behavior. Indeed, as arbitrageurs, warlords welcome boundaries, for those very boundaries provide the market horizons which allow warlord elites to go about their business.

International and domestic strategies of warlord reduction, then, must focus on questions other than sovereignty. Border delineation and constitutional engineering are not the issues. If one conceives of warlords as arbitrageurs, there are other ways of reducing the profitability of warlord behavior, by eliminating the pricing differentials across market boundaries, for example. And that can be accomplished in several ways: by increasing the costs of production, storage and transport of the marketed good; by decreasing the demand for it in one or both markets; or by increasing the supply in one or more markets. These strategies, in turn, depend on working toward the establishment of law-governed polities, cleaning up corrupt policing, providing institutions of security beyond those purveyed by warlord elites, and working to meet the real needs of local populations which led them to acquiesce to warlord governance in the first place.

In Eurasia, this view of the behavior of warlord elites has particular relevance at present, given shifts in the nature of the policy environment in which warlord states currently exist. The “Kosovo precedent”—the likely independence of the internationally

administered enclave and former warlord state of Kosovo—has already been cited by political leaders in Russia as a model for the future status of several unrecognized states across Eurasia. The language of “precedents” and “models” would be mainly rhetorical were it not for several important factors. These factors have changed the context in which the international community must address the implications of Kosovo for the Eurasian conflict zones.

First, Moscow is now engaged, more energetically than ever, in the de facto integration of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia into Russia itself. (Nagorno-Karabakh has been de facto integrated with Armenia for some time and is generally beyond the direct Russian sphere of influence.) There is a strong desire among the people of these regions to be united, in some form, with Russia. Transnistria has held a referendum on the issue; the voting was not held under international supervision, but most observers agree that the strongly positive vote—in favor of becoming part of the Russian Federation—does reflect the broad wishes of the Transnistrian people. Many people in the former conflict zones regularly vote with their feet, by working inside Russia and sending remittances home. Others vote with their passports, by eagerly accepting international travel documents offered by the Russian Foreign Ministry, making them, for all practical purposes, Russian subjects.

Second, the effective end of the war in Chechnya has allowed Russia to again concentrate on relations with what used to be termed its “near abroad”. There is a renewed energy in Russian foreign policy, especially on Moldova and Georgia, and that energy has been translated into a confrontational stance. For places such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the implications of this policy are important. With Russia effectively

giving up direct control over its own north Caucasus, the distinction is fading between being formally ‘inside’ the federation and formally “outside”. Today, from the perspective of an average citizen, living in Abkhazia makes one as much a part of the Russian Federation as living in Kabardino-Balkaria—even though the former is de jure part of Georgia, the latter de jure part of Russia.

Third, Moldova and Georgia are increasingly frustrated by the international community’s ignoring the problem of Eurasia’s warlord states. Over the last year, this frustration has been manifested in Georgia’s continually upping the ante in its relations with Russia, at times even actively provoking Moscow when a more diplomatic strategy might have been desirable. In time, the Georgian government may calculate that pushing Russia even further—perhaps even to the point of military confrontation—is the only way to secure the interest of the West. The government in Tbilisi is afraid that it could become the first victim of the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo, outside the context of a negotiated settlement with Belgrade.

The Eurasian warlord states have, up to now, been in the middle of a “helping stalemate”, that is, all the major players have been content to allow the region’s frozen conflicts to remain frozen—formally unresolved but with little immediate threat of escalation to violence. Kosovo will almost certainly change that balance. There are plenty of reasons that Kosovo simply is not the same as Abkhazia. But without clearly stating why the logic of Kosovo should not be applied farther east, or a policy on under what terms the Kosovo precedent would make sense for places such as Abkhazia and Transnistria, the West will be in a position of continually playing defense to Russia’s offense. In the present context, with Russia energetically absorbing three of the four

former conflict zones, the choice before the West is not one between independence and reintegration with the recognized states of Georgia and Moldova. It is, instead, between preventing the effective Russian seizure of other countries' sovereign territory or working to make the existing warlord republics more democratic and more engaged with the international system.

Notes

¹ Fernand Braudel, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, trans. Siân Reynolds (London: Collins, 1972), Vol. 2, pp. 692-693.

² I use the terms “warlords,” “warlord states,” and “warlord elites” in an analytical sense, much in the way that similar terms are used in Chinese historiography: to describe state-like entities which are not under the control of a central authority and lack legitimacy in the view of national and international institutions. “Warlords,” in this usage, are not figures who are constantly engaged in making war.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, English Traits (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1902 [1856]), p. 168.

⁴ Arthur Waldron, “The Warlord: Twentieth-Century Chinese Understandings of Violence, Militarism, and Imperialism,” American Historical Review, Vol. 96, No. 4 (October 1991): 1073-1100.

⁵ Sasha Lezhnev, Crafting Peace: Strategies to Deal with Warlords in Collapsing States (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), pp. 1-12.

⁶ Kimberly Marten, “Warlordism in Comparative Perspective,” International Security, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Winter 2006/2007): 41-73.

⁷ See Stephen John Stedman, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” International Security, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997): 5-53; William Reno, Warlord Politics and African States (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998); idem, “Mafiya Troubles, Warlord Crises,” in Mark R. Beissinger and Crawford Young, eds., Beyond State Crisis? Postcolonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

University Press, 2002); Paul B. Rich, ed., Warlordism in International Relations (New York: St. Martin's, 1999); Robert H. Jackson, Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Paul Jackson, "Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance," Small Wars and Insurgencies, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2003): 131-150.

⁸ See Dudley Ankersen, Agrarian Warlord: Saturnino Cedillo and the Mexican Revolution in San Luis Potosí (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984); Edward A. McCord, The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Penny MacGeorge, Late Roman Warlords (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Arthur Waldron, From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924-1925 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁹ See Lucian W. Pye, Warlord Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China (New York: Praeger, 1971); Donald G. Gillin, "Portrait of a Warlord: Yen Hsi-shan in Shansi Province, 1911-1930," Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 19, No. 3 (May 1960): 289-306; David Harris, "From 'Warlord' to 'Democratic' President: How Charles Taylor Won the 1997 Liberian Elections," Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 37, No. 3 (1999): 431-455; Alfred H. Y. Lin, "Building and Funding a Warlord Regime: The Experience of Chen Jitang in Guangdong, 1929-1936," Modern China, Vol. 28, No. 2 (April 2002): 177-212.

¹⁰ Vadim Volkov, Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). I borrow this term from Volkov, who uses it in a rather different sense.

¹¹ See William Reno, "Order and Commerce in Turbulent Areas: 19th Century Lessons, 21st Century Practice," Third World Quarterly, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2004): 607-625; Peter Kirkow, "Regional Warlordism in Russia: The Case of Primorskii Krai," Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 47, No. 6 (1995): 923-947; Ross E. Dunn, "Bu Himara's European Connexion: The Commercial Relations of a Moroccan Warlord," Journal of African History, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1980): 235-353; Stergios Skaperdas, "Warlord Competition," Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2002): 435-446; Lezhnev and Rich, op. cit.

¹² Mancur Olson, Power and Prosperity (New York: BasicBooks, 2000).

¹³ Charles Tilly, Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990 (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990); Charles Tilly, ed., The Formation of National States in Western Europe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). See also Karen Barkey, Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ For analyses of the Transnistrian case in particular, see Stefan Troebst, "We Are Transnistrians! Post-Soviet Identity Management in the Dniester Valley," Ab Imperio, Vol. 1 (2003): 437-466; and Vladimir Solonari, "Vladimir Solonari, 'Creating a 'People': A Case Study in Post-Soviet History-Writing," Kritika, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 2003): 411-438.