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States and Conflict in the Former USSR

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Introduction

The 2008 conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia was a surprise. It would be too much to say that the former USSR was peaceful before the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian conflict but there had been no new outbreaks of major violence since the collapse of Soviet power. The major conflicts of the post-Soviet period – the fighting in Chechnya, the ongoing disputes over Nagorno-Karabakh, Transdnestria, Abkhazia, Ossetia, and the civil war in Tajikistan (which ended in 1997) – all started during, or were provoked by, the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹

Abstract

Many would characterise the international politics of the former Soviet Union as being fraught with competition and beset by weakness, war and chaos associated with contestations between nations and identities but this has paradoxically not generated a great deal of violent conflict since the end of the USSR.

Most violent conflict experienced in the post-Soviet space have their roots in the struggles that took place as the USSR collapsed – such as the frozen conflict in South Ossetia – and new conflicts have been rare and small in scale. This paper asks why there have not been more wars in this sub-region.

¹ See the list of violent post-Soviet conflicts in J. Hughes and G. Sasse (eds), Ethnicity and territory in the former Soviet Union. Regions in conflict, (London, Frank Cass, 2002), xiii. Only the conflicts in Tajikistan and Chechnya post-date the end of the USSR but each was intimately related to the Soviet Union’s demise. The end of the USSR prompted the conflict in Tajikistan and the protagonists formed up for the fight in the last months of 1991 by creating militias, ready for the outbreak of war in 1992. See J. Heathershaw, Post-conflict Tajikistan. The politics of peace building and the emergence of legitimate order, (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.19-30. The origins of the conflict in Chechnya also lay in the
Most of these conflicts have never really ended, but they have ‘frozen’ due to stalemate or Russian force. Consequently whilst they are not free of violence, the violence they have suffered has been generally low in intensity and extensity. Where there has been new conflict it has been short lived and has often been localised. Clashes between state forces, rebel and other armed groups in various parts of the former USSR since 1991, such as the fighting in Moscow following the closure of parliament in 1993, or in Central Asia with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan after 1999, have either been small scale or contained, and did not spread despite some apocalyptic warnings. Violence against civilians in the form of human rights violations has in at least one case – Andijan in Uzbekistan in 2005 – led to large-scale loss of life, but again, the violence was contained and short-lived as mass and open fighting and repression. There has been violence during political succession struggles as during the 2005 ‘Tulip Revolution’ in Kyrgyzstan. However, again, the extensity of conflict associated with these events is low so that in the post-Soviet space overall the scale of new conflicts, the Russian-Georgian war aside, has been relatively low.

This state of relative ‘peace’ across the USSR is the topic of this paper. The paper discusses why there has been no widespread conflict in the form of civil war or inter-state conflict in the region since 1991 and whether this absence of conflict can be expected to continue in the near future. In particular it will focus on Central Asia and Russia, although mention will be made of other cases too, and on the relationship between domestic politics and civil war and inter-state conflict. Russia and Central Asia are areas where more conflict has been expected than has occurred, and where gauging the prospects and sources of future conflict is important because of their geopolitical and economic importance. They are also between them broadly comparable to other parts of the former USSR so that

USSR’s dying days despite the fact that the major bouts of fighting there took place between 1994 and 1996, and 1999 to (at least) the mid-2000s. Aspects of the Chechen conflict’s nature might have changed over time but its roots lay in, and the initial skirmish between Russia and separatist forces took place alongside, the collapse of the USSR, see R. Sakwa, ‘Introduction: why Chechnya?’, in R. Sakwa (ed.) Chechnya. From past to future (London: Anthem Press, 2005), pp.1-20 and J. Hughes, Chechnya. From nationalism to jihad (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). 2


understanding them and the potential for conflict within them may give us some clue to the reasons for conflict in other post-Soviet areas in the past and the prospects for conflict more widely within the post-Soviet space. The focus on domestic politics should not be taken to mean that international politics and exogenous factors are not important; reference will be made to such external factors where appropriate. Rather it is the argument here that thus far conflict has been dampened down in the region because of the ways in which domestic political developments have weakened social mobilisation and co-opted domestic elites. The area’s relative ‘peace’ is, however, highly contingent. The extent of its contingency can be seen by the fact that it is in many ways unexpected and, especially when we consider the wider region in to which Central Asia fits, unusual. Post-Soviet Central Asia is a zone of relative stability within the ‘wider’ Central Asia (roughly post-Soviet Central Asia plus Afghanistan and Pakistan) and the larger Middle East (roughly the above plus Iran, Iraq, the Arab states and Israel) areas that have been labelled the ‘world’s most unstable region’ and a ‘threat to global security’.6

In order to get a sense of the contingency of the region’s relative peace the chapter starts by examining expectations about the prospects for conflict in the area. The belief that there should be conflict in the area has been widespread since 1991 as a quick look at the titles of many of the books on the region’s wider politics shows: many contain the word conflict, or in the case of journalistic accounts the words blood and oil, in the title.7 The region has even been offered up as a new ‘arc of crisis’ to replace that of the Cold War (roughly around the Indian Ocean) described by Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1979.8 The idea that there should have been more conflict in the region comes from the analytical frameworks that have been used to assess the prospects for peace in the area. These frameworks have often been based on two assumptions that have sometimes operated singularly and sometimes together. These assumptions are first, that peace needs to be based on the construction of democracy, and second, that peace will only come about through the construction of states in the region that have capacity to develop the societies they manage. These assumptions are frequently related and operate together since it is believed that only a democracy can create a state with capacity. The chapter unpacks these assumptions and argues that they do not necessarily apply to the region as yet. Contrary to these assumptions this chapter will argue that it is the avoidance of democracy and related state building that has helped to preserve the relative peace

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6 A. Rashid, Descent into chaos. The world’s most unstable region and the threat to global security (London: Penguin, 2009).
of the area. Instead of trying to develop either democracy and/or to build up state capacity, political leaders in the region have concentrated on regime building and the management of elites that this entails. In Central Asia this has sometimes happened with the connivance – deliberate and accidental – of outside powers, most notably Russia and China. Political leaders in the area have been relatively successful at this process of regime building and it has often supplanted state building. The chapter makes an argument as to why state building is more dangerous than regime building; state building threatens elites, regime building can be used to buy them off.

This success at regime over state building does not mean that violence and conflict are permanently off the agenda in Central Asia. The paper will argue that the ability to build regimes at the expense of state building and its attendant dangers has taken place in fairly unique circumstances. These circumstances have provided the rulers of the area with the resources to buy-off rivals and forestall conflict but they may not be able to do this over the longer term so that issues of state building might have to be faced and the dangers of conflict dealt with more forcefully and directly both locally and by the international community than has so far been the case. Predictions of violence in the area have not been true in the past, in other words, but they may yet come back to haunt the region and its inhabitants.

**Our motto: ‘apocalypse soon’. Expectations of conflict in the post-Soviet space**

The post-Soviet space, and especially Central Asia, has many of the features that we associate with conflict both between, and especially within, states. The expectation that there will be conflict within the area has therefore been fairly constant since 1991. As we have already said, the reasons for this are due to the analytical frameworks through which the region is viewed. These frameworks expect that conflict will be produced in the absence of democracy and/or of states with some capacity to develop their societies. These assumptions about democracy and conflict and states and conflict are derived from expectations about conflict in states derived from comparative politics and international relations. It is questionable, however, how applicable they are to Central Asia and Russia, or indeed to the wider post-Soviet area. The following section will look at the assumptions and their application and in the next their actual applicability.

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The assumption that not being a democracy leads to conflict is a product of the large literature surrounding the idea of democratic peace (the notion that democracies do not fight one another). This has had two spin-offs that are of concern. First, the idea that democracies do not go to war with one another has been adapted to distinguish between full and fledgling democracies. Whilst the former are peaceful in their relations to one another, the latter are not. Indeed, one line of argument shows that new democracies might be more war prone than stable authoritarian states. This is because elites whose positions are not secure in a transitional polity, or who fear that they will lose traditional prerogatives in the process of change, might provoke conflict to protect their interests. This is arguably easier to achieve in a transitional polity where questions of identity and interest may be in flux and where institutional practices are still novel. These can make it easier to mobilise for conflict and to leverage domestic problems in to support for military action. Second, there is the idea that unfinished democratisation and the political chaos that comes from failing to consolidate a particular form of political regime creates the basis for intra-state conflict. This is because an unfinished democracy allows for collective action (unlike dictatorship) but does not create channels to make such collective action effective (unlike democracy). The result is frustration and this leads to violence by political losers. When rulers respond in kind a cycle of violence ensues. Unfinished democracies – variously labelled semi-democracies or anocracies – are thus more prone to political violence generally and civil war specifically. Legitimacy is also in shorter supply in an anocracy so that the recourse to violence is not constrained by social attitudes.

The second assumption, that states with the capacity to manage and transform their societies are required to avoid conflict, is related to the assumption about the need for consolidated democracy at a normative level. Democracy is frequently regarded as providing state capacity since it creates state autonomy and legitimates power. By providing state autonomy democracy frees rulers from having to satisfy powerful social interests so that they can manage society more easily and hence avoid conflict. This helps provide additional legitimacy to democracy, but democracy’s own legitimacy drawn from the ballot box and political participation also generates some state capacity through the creation of infrastructural state
power.13 This form of state power sees the state intersect with society and able to draw on social resources and compliance to generate capacity. Democracy and state capacity are thus related to some extent in theory and in the literature.14 The failure to develop one is often taken as a proxy for the failure to develop the other. This has been especially common in Russia. The failures of state development in the 1990s were frequently ascribed to the same factors as the failures of democracy. The failures of democratic transformation and of state development were also each ascribed to the other.15 The ultimate danger perceived in this is that it places states within the region at risk of failing; and failed states are synonymous with conflict and the export of that conflict since in a failed state the monopoly over violence that is core to the state’s definition disappears and is contested by would-be violence-monopolists.

Working from these assumptions Central Asia, and to a lesser extent Russia, were always going to be prey to conflict in the post-communist era because of the weakness of their putative democracies and the fragility of their states. There was more active campaigning for independence – at least in the form of sovereignty – in Russia than in Central Asia, but independence exposed the structural weakness of statehood in both areas. Central Asia was ‘profoundly’ unprepared as Pauline Luong Jones puts it, since the new countries there ‘lacked viable economies as well as state structures and ideologies capable of linking indigenous leaders to their societies’.16 Likewise Russia, it was argued, was lacking in any cohesive national identity that could rally its population behind a project of renewal.17 State building tasks were therefore huge and involved not just reordering of economies and systems of public administration, but also questions of identity. The bigger the task of state building the greater the danger, especially because weak democracy creates the prospect of violence arising from the inability of emerging political systems to contain protest. This danger was predominantly described in ethnic, clan (and other forms of tribal and familial affinity) and regional terms in Central Asia, although the distinctions between these different categories are often obscure due to their

14 For an example of this connection in a study of the wider post-Soviet region see T.W. Simons, Eurasia’s new frontiers. Young states, old societies, open futures, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
overlap. The very act of state building, in particular the ideational dimensions involved in creating some form of citizenship around which state and reform mobilisation could be based, would, it was believed, provoke ethnic hostilities. These ethnic hostilities had been largely hidden under Soviet rule until perestroika had reactivated them as actual or potential sources of political and social mobilisation. Ethnic identities had been a source of violence as the USSR collapsed, most notably in Nagorno-Karabakh but also in Central Asia where there had been clashes over land rights between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks around the city of Osh in the Ferghana valley, where Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan intersect. Post-Soviet state building, it was believed, would reinforce emergent ethnic identities and set them against one another even more as the process of creating state citizenship would inevitably marginalise some ethnic identities. Indeed, it was posited that the very fact of independence created a surge of ethnic tension because independence shifted relations of domination that had existed in the Soviet period down a level: Russian ethnic domination was automatically replaced by the domination of titular nationalities (that is the nationality around which Soviet republics had been formed) so that new hierarchies of domination and resistance were formed. What was true of ethnic domination was also true of regional and clan patterns of domination. Ethnicity, however, was seen as especially dangerous because all of the Central Asian states had highly mixed ethnic populations and because there was a ‘disjuncture between state and national boundaries’ due to the arbitrary establishment of republican borders. The republics of Central Asia from which the new states were formed had been created were largely artificial creations of the Soviet colonial power in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This solidified notions of ethnicity that had often been loose and malleable, and frequently turned them against each other, rather than against Moscow, as different ethnic groups worked to distinguish themselves from one another and ensure their dominance in the republic of which they were the titular nationality. Moreover, borders made no concessions to ethnic affinities or economic rationality. The new republics, and hence their successor states, were left with far larger minority groups than might

have been the case and were weakened economically by the arbitrary division of what had previously been common economic spaces.\textsuperscript{22}

There were consequently multiple points of potential conflict within former USSR and Central Asia in particular. In Central Asia these problems were particularly talked up because the regimes there were defined as ‘nationalising’ due to the absence of any prior historical national identity that could be drawn on to consolidate stateness in the region.\textsuperscript{23} In short, because they had farther to go to define themselves as states the potential for conflict in their unfinished democracies looked that much greater. There were fears that that mobilisation of ethnicity would be a strategy adopted by elites trying to compensate for weak democratic and systemic legitimacy, or to try to force their way in to (or out of) the political system by playing the nationalist card.\textsuperscript{24} The multi-ethnic nature of the states of the region and the large potential for conflict envisaged as a result made the prospect of this mobilisation more dangerous and likely. Conflicts over state-building in one nation might spill over and draw in outside powers tempted to shore up their regimes by protecting their fellow ethnics across some historically poorly defined border. In the words of one analyst, there was a danger that the region would move from being a ‘melting pot’ to a ‘cauldron’.\textsuperscript{25} There were also a large Russian diaspora across the former USSR and fears that there would be mobilisation in Russia to protect this diaspora. On top of this it was sometimes asserted that Russia would have difficulty adjusting to its new status as a post-imperial power; this might lead it to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy as it sought to compensate for its loss of status and as leaders mobilised around nationalist issues to contain popular resentment at the loss of national authority and power.\textsuperscript{26}

All told then, Central Asia and Russia seemed to be a perfect breeding ground for violence as weak democracies (at best) and as nationalising states searching for an identity and rallying ideology. Russia’s failure to consolidate its democracy, the mobilisation of nationalist forces from both right and left in opposition to reform,

\textsuperscript{22} A good brief description can be found in O. Roy, The new Central Asia. The creation of nations, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 61-78.
\textsuperscript{24} Tishkov, Ethnicity, nationalism and conflict, chapter 11.
the large vote share given to ultra-nationalist parties like Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic Party of Russia in elections in 1993 and 1995, as well as the Tajik civil war and the Russian invasion of Chechnya at the end of 1994, all seemed to confirm that the semi-democracies of the region were promoting conflict at worse, or at best barely containing it. This brought in to play the second assumption that has underlain expectations about conflict in the region, the state assumption. If democracies could not stabilise and contain conflict, and if the new polities of the area could no create political systems that could manage reform then there was the danger that they would fail to generate the state capacity needed to manage society. There were two possible outcomes from this.

First, anocracy would endure. This might not mean conflict and violence, but it would mean that conflict and violence could not ever be ruled out: enduring liberal peace would not be built. As Gail Lapidus has put it, whilst predictions about communal violence have not by and large come true, ‘the potential for future conflict remains high’ because of a ‘striking failure to create strong and efficacious states where the rule of law and the protection of minorities are not only enshrined in institutions and law but also assimilated in the dominant political culture and patterns of behaviour.’

Second, and far worse, was the prospect that in the absence of strong states being built state failure would occur. State failure by its very definition involves intra-state conflict and potentially leads to the exportation of this conflict to neighbours and/or a diminution of their economic capacity, which in turn can impact their existence as states. Its civil war meant that Tajikistan failed as a state before it was even really instituted as an independent state and there has been speculation since about the prospects of Russia and other Central Asian states failing (or in Tajikistan’s case failing for a second time).

This speculation grew as interest in the role of failed states in international politics expanded after 9/11 and partly, as there was a failure to develop states in the region through democracy promotion and economic reform. Increased attention to the problems created by failed states after 9/11 led to various measures of state failure being constructed and studies conducted to spot the next failed state. These indices and studies, like The Fund for Peace’s Failed States Index, the World Bank’s ‘fragile states’ or ‘Low Income Countries under Stress’ studies, George Mason University’s Political Instability Taskforce ‘state failure’ project, or The Brookings

28 P. Collier, The bottom billion. Why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 4.
Institution’s *Index of state weakness in the developing world*, generally list one or more of the Central Asian states on their ‘at danger’ lists or as very weak states, and they frequently score low on political and economic measures.\(^{29}\) All the Central Asian states are listed in Paul Collier’s ‘bottom billion’ list of borderline and already failed states.\(^{30}\) More specifically there have been a number of studies that have analysed developments in Russia and Central Asia as leading them to, or raising the prospect of state failure. The economic crisis of 1998 in Russia, for example, was described as creating the conditions in which state failure might occur.\(^{31}\) Prophecies of failure are even more common for Central Asia. A core assumption of the failed state concept is that weak states can be pushed over the edge and in to failure by any kind of crisis, political economic, natural disaster, or an event that elsewhere would be innocuous. Such precipitating events of failure can be domestic or international in origin. All post-Soviet states have been described as weak from both domestic and international perspectives.\(^{32}\) The problem is magnified for post-Soviet Central Asia due to its border with Afghanistan and the possibility of the conflicts there spilling over. This creates an obvious source of potential state failure, especially since cross-border incursions played a role in the Tajik civil war, and Afghanistan was a base for the IMU and its incursions in to the region before the defeat of the Taliban.\(^{33}\) However since more or less any event can lead a weak state to failure the prospect of failure can be constantly invoked. Political succession, economic problems, environmental issues, events such as the killings in Andijan, etc. can all be talked of as precursors of state failure and the conflicts and spillover violence that would follow. These prophecies are most commonly invoked for Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where the combination of poverty (particularly for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and high levels of political repression (particularly for Uzbekistan but intermittently for the other two) means that they score particularly poorly on measures of state weakness.\(^{34}\)


\(^{30}\) Collier, Wars, guns and votes, 239-240


The false premises of expectations

Expectations of conflict have thus outstripped the level of conflict in the post-Soviet space. What is holding the region back from falling into the conflict traps that commonly beset poor (in all senses of the word) democracies and weak states? This section posits two reasons why conflict has not been as widespread as expected. First, the ideas underpinning the regime and state assumptions about conflict are faulty, or at least not as absolute and watertight as explanations or predictive theories as they might seem. Consequently we can question their application to the area. Second, there are some crucial differences between Central Asia and Russia, and other weak democracies and states, which have kept the former (relatively) conflict free.

There has not been a straightforward translation of regime type and state weakness into conflict in the area is that the relationship between regime, state and conflict needs to be qualified generally. Anocracy is arguably no more associated with civil war than any other form of regime. This raises the issue of reverse causality: it is not regime form that determines political violence in the case of anocracies, but political violence that creates anocracies and this may lead to civil war. Absent political violence and a semi-democracy is no more likely to collapse into violence than any other regime. This puts a new spin on the prospects of avoiding conflict in Russia and Central Asia since political violence (repression excepted), as opposed to violence driven by economic motives (crime), has been low. The collapse of the USSR was, as many studies have noted, remarkably free of violence in comparison to the collapse of other empires and in comparison to the collapse of the other main federal communist state, Yugoslavia. Outside of the Chechen and Tajik cases violence at the moment that the USSR collapsed did not generally beget violence, nor was it the source of weak democracies. The other conflicts that had already broken out in Georgia and between Azerbaijan and Armenia before the USSR’s collapse either froze with the collapse of the USSR or at least began to wind down to a considerable extent. It would be hard to say that this freeze weakened democracy in the region, and until the Georgian-Russian conflict it had not led to war. Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia would not have had much smoother a transition

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to democracy if they had settled their border disputes; Tajikistan was not destined for democracy if it had not had a civil war and Russia’s erratic democratisation would have been erratic with or without Chechnya. Democratic weakness in the region had other, multiple sources but these do not seem to have been responsible for generating conflict. Indeed, one could argue the opposite has often been the case. Democracy has been weakened in part so that conflict can be contained and avoided. The reason for this is not altruistic on the part of rulers in the area. They have simply been trying to consolidate their power and head off threats to it and their repression of violence is no different in this regard to the suppression of pluralism. Leaders have thus learnt from the past and contained conflict. All the leaders of the region learnt from the Ferghana valley conflicts during perestroika, from the fates of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and from the war in Tajikistan, that conflicts might be latent in the region, and can threaten retention of power as they did in Georgia and Azerbaijan in particular. The settlement of the Tajik conflict has lead to the construction of a non-democratic regime in order to try to maintain peace rather than the democratic settlement called for by international agencies charged with securing the peace. Such a settlement would in theory consolidate peace since stability and its benefits would come from the construction of a legitimate political order. However on the ground this has been achieved via an ‘illiberal’ deal that has worked to contain conflict.\[^{37}\]

The construction of non-democratic political regimes in the post-Soviet space has not, therefore, bred conflict as the literature might lead us to expect. As will be argued below, the opposite may well be the case. There are similar problems with the idea that state weakness is a precursor to conflict and its application to the post-Soviet space. The dividing line between what constitutes a weak state and a failed one is conceptually unclear. The extent of conceptual confusion can be seen in the different terms and definitions of weak and failed states: for some analysts a state that does not deliver public goods is a failed state, for others it is merely weak; for some there is a difference between a failed state, where there is conflict over political order, and a collapsed sate, where that order has evaporated, for others not since both experience political violence and contests over the right to monopolise violence.\[^{38}\] Not surprisingly, therefore, there is no common set of ideas underpinning expectations of conflict emerging from weak states to turn them in to failed or collapsed states, or even states just further weakened by violence. Instead expectations that there will be conflict in weak states combine analogies and a structural reading of how the international system affects weak states.

The structural reading of how the international system affects weak states contrasts the Cold War and post-Cold War international systems and how they create or destroy conditions that enable weak states to survive without falling into conflict. The argument here is that the bipolar competition of the Cold War years generated resources and substituted for state building in some parts of the world so that conflict was contained to some extent. Where there was still conflict it had state-like attributes – warring factions had a state project and a mobilising ideology – thanks to their sponsorship by the capitalist West or the socialist East. Conflicts and wars were therefore not as common as might have been expected and normal; even when they were civil wars they were forms of state-to-state conflict by proxy. The end of the Cold War and bipolarity, and the failure of a new world order to build an effective and legitimate state system and system of intervention has meant that there are more conflicts and they are more intractable because their nature has changed. With the end of the Cold War the costs of violence in weak states declined to the outside world so there was less international pressure to control and contain it. At the same time the security rents that weak states got from their sponsors disappeared, as did other financial aid that had flowed to them because of the Cold War. With less outside constraint and a revenue squeeze the result was conflict as groups competed for scarce resources. Consequently, the form of this conflict was ‘new wars’, ‘resource wars’ etc, where struggles centred on controlling resources that were easy to appropriate, and where conflict was more intractable because combatants did not want to surrender seized resources or were desperate to seize their share. This pattern theoretically applies where ever there are weak states since the end of the Cold War and bipolarity are systemic changes that apply across the international system. The proof of this structural reading of the security dilemmas facing weak states consists of analogies. Initially the analogies drawn were to the former Yugoslavia and its wars. Increasingly, however, the analogy drawn has been between Central Asia and Africa. Central Asia (and sometimes the post-Soviet space more generally) and Africa are said to share certain characteristics that make them prone to state failure. These shared characteristics have already

43 Rubin, ‘Central Asia wars and ethnic conflicts’ makes a long comparison of Central Asia and Africa, particularly the Great Lakes region. Other comparisons between Africa and the post-Soviet space more generally, including Central Asia and Russia, can be found in M.R. Beissinger and C. Young, (eds.)
been referred to above; they are the same features of Central Asia that help to weaken them as democracies and states: their arbitrary borders that create complex ethnic mixes, post-colonial economic deformations, absence of a pre-colonial state history, forms of tribalism and sub-ethnic clan affinities etc. Since these led to conflict in Africa – in Somalia, the Great Lakes region, Liberia, Sierra Leone etc. – they are expected to have an analogous impact in the post-Soviet region.

These analogies are, however, just that, analogies, and are not watertight explanations, and the grounds on which they are made is not that secure. It is debatable whether there is any more conflict now than in the recent past. The Cold War may have been a the ‘Long Peace’, as John Lewis Gaddis put it, in North America and Europe, but not elsewhere in the world. Arguably – it depends in part on what counts as war – there is now less conflict than there was during the Cold War. There is no space to evaluate claims about the incidence of war before and after 1991 here, but the fact that the issue can be raised throws some doubt on any simple assumption that structural changes to the international system translate into more wars or create greater risk of conflict in areas that have characteristics that we might expect to lead to conflict. Indeed, it is possible argue that the problem is not the post-Cold war international system but the process of getting to that system. The end of the old system caused by the collapse of some of the states that formed it rather than the post-Cold War order caused conflict that has died down as the new order has taken shape. The wars in former Yugoslavia and the war in Tajikistan would be cases in point. These conflicts were not caused by post-Cold War multipolarity but (in part) by the events that lead to the collapse of bipolarity. Moreover, once the shift from one form of international balance of power was completed these wars also ended.

Avoiding conflict in the post-Soviet space: the distinction between state and regime building

There are thus good grounds to doubt the strength of the link between changes internationally and the outbreak of war or its increased durability generally, let alone in the post-Soviet space, and to doubt that there is an automatic progression

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45 Collier, *War, guns and votes,* 4-5.
from weak democracy and weak statehood to conflict. Even if there were not it would not automatically be the case that more conflict in some parts of the world because of the end of the Cold War or because of weak democracy/statehood should mean that the same conditions that spark these conflicts pertain in large parts of the former USSR. The development of weak democracy (at best) is not a cause of conflict in the former USSR, but has so far constrained it. Likewise the weakness of post-Soviet states is not – or at least not yet – a source of instability, rather it is a result of regime building strategies that have controlled conflict. The post-Soviet space has, therefore, for the most part departed from the widely accepted norms about state, regime and conflict. It has done this because of the success of many post-Soviet leaders in substituting regime building for state building, a success that is based on Soviet legacies, patrimonial political economy and a particular security environment. These have enabled post-Soviet leaders to trade state building off against regime building. To understand this we must first understand that there are differences between state and regime building and how they can be traded off against each other.

State and regime building are related processes. However, whilst building a state implies the construction of a regime, constructing a regime does not always lead to the development of a strong state, one that has a capacity to make policy and enact it so as to provide welfare and security to its people, or indeed to the development of any great state capacity at all. This is because state building and regime building have different criteria for success and failure, and need not be complimentary even if they affect one another. A regime may be consolidated when elites achieve a set of political rules that they cannot change without incurring a disproportionate cost to themselves. A state formation is consolidated when officials have the ability and resources to perform state functions of maintaining order and security. The essential difference between state and regime therefore, is that state formation is not just a matter of elite competition whereas in the short-term regime formation may be just that, a matter of elite struggle during which elites may or may not, according to circumstance, respond to or ignore state building pressures. States as functional (albeit unconscious) structures have some interest autonomous of elites, in particular they have an interest in international competition and domestic order, and this makes them, in Skocpol’s classic formulation, an ‘autonomous structure - a structure with a logic and interests of its own not necessarily equivalent to, or fused with, the interests of the dominant class in society or the full set of member groups in the polity’. The degree to which states are autonomous ‘can come and go’, as

46 The regime built in the course of constructing a state may not necessarily be the regime that was intended to manage the new state. Soviet history shows this very well. The Bolsheviks built a state but the regime that dominated it was very different to what they had initially intended.
Skocpol later put it, since the structural potential for autonomous action - as well as stimulus for it - can vary over time and from state sector to state sector.\(^{48}\) Pressure to develop the state can come from one, few, or all of a state’s composite officials and institutions, or be brought to bear on them from society. But no matter where the pressure comes from, state formation involves first, more complex tasks of social and economic management than regime formation; keeping order generally requires organisation and resources additional to those needed to keep order among competing elites, and gathering these resources may strain elite agreements about the economic basis of a regime. Second, state formation has an international dimension to it that is structural. Traditional security concerns – real and perceived - are still an issue in many parts of the post-communist world, and states still need to develop as military and extractive structures to cope with security demands. This creates pressures for state development. Where these pressures are absent is equally telling. If such pressures are absent, there is a possibility that a regime might develop without having to pay much attention to state development. This would mean that state and regime might be stable, despite state weakness and inability to deal with transformation tasks.

State building over time thus influences regime stability, but in the short-run regime formation primarily involves elites and is determined by their interaction, the pressures upon them and the environment in which they interact. Regime building may overlap with state building as an elite may try to prop up its preferred regime by delivering greater state capacity and public goods. Alternately, regime building might substitute for state building as elites capture rather than develop the state. Both strategies can be successful but over the longer term, the better developed a state the more likely there is to government stability and hence regime stability since continuity of governments, or at least their regularised replacement, is less likely to call in to question the basis on which power is accessed and used. How long this ‘long term’ is depends on the pressures that a country has to deal with. Where pressures are great supplanting regime for state building will be dangerous, especially if the state has low capacity to begin with. A regime in a state with high capacity has more resources to deploy, better chances of extracting extra resources to deal with problems, and potentially more and broader reserves of political loyalty to fall back on because it is able to deliver a wider range of public goods through the state. Moreover, there is less chance of political fragmentation if the delivery of these goods is not directly from the regime but is filtered through a state with capacity rather than delivered through some faction of a regime. Where states deliver public goods they can be rationed in times of crisis or shortage; where delivery of goods is personalised through connection to the regime there is more

chance of political contestation because power within a regime depends on ability
to deliver resources so that they become objects of struggle between regime groups
or unevenly distributed so that regime legitimacy declines.

The consolidation of a state formation in post-communism is potentially a far more
difficult thing to achieve than the consolidation of a regime since managing the
classic state functions of social order and national security involves questions of
borders, citizenship, and the establishment of new forms of economic exchange and
rules to govern them. A regime may be consolidated before a state develops that
can resolve the problems of post-communist reconstruction and fulfil the classic
functions of a state easily. If this occurs, the question before a regime is can it
contain and ameliorate the problems of reconstruction and maintaining social order
and national security in such a way that it can survive ruling through a weak (i.e.,
one that cannot resolve post-communist transformation or traditional state tasks)
state? If a regime cannot contain or ameliorate these pressures some other way (for
example by gaining aid or security guarantees from other states) then it will come
under pressure to evolve further and to develop the state. Where this pressure
exists and is not responded to the long-term viability of a regime will be open to
question. The viability of a regime in these circumstances may be called into
question from below or from within the state as pressure to take action grows in
reaction to perceived threats to the interests of state officials and to their ability to
perform basic state functions of maintaining order and security.

Regime building at the expense of state building is thus in all probability a short-
term solution to problems of consolidating and maintaining political order,
although as a short-term it may run for some time. Substituting regime for state
building has two main dimensions to it. First, there are state building issues
involving questions of identity, of citizenship, and borders. These are obviously
important to new states and may be particularly important for controlling the extent
and intensity of potential ethnic unrest. Favouring regime over state building has
meant either that such state building projects have been weakened, or at least that
they are weak at crucial moments of time when they might be more disruptive and
conflict prone. Second, there is the issue of elite stability in the face of reforms to
build up the capacity of the state as an administrative and economic actor. This may
have ethnic dimensions but the issue that we will deal with here is primarily that of
central elite stability and central-local elite relations. Reform and the development
of state capacity means the alteration of existing power relations, the redistribution
of power amongst elites to, what for them, may be uncertain – and hence
undesirable – ends, especially where political power is a prerequisite for economic
affluence. Where regime building is favoured over state building, balancing power and ensuring that economic power is maintained will be as, and generally more, important than passing power from elites and social groups to state institutions and developing the state to promote such things as economic growth that will change the balance of economic fortune and power. The forms of conflict that are potentially involved here may be less extensive and bloody than communal violence, since they may be more focussed as coups, conflicts over election results etc. However these are potentially structurally violent in that they may damage the economic fortunes of a nation, and often lead to wider conflict. Over and above these two dimensions of state and regime building hovers the questions of why state building can be traded off in favour of regime building and for how long.

Avoiding conflict in the post-Soviet space: state and regime building practices

State building as a process of identity formation involving the development of citizenship through such things as language and education policies, and the creation of new political and economic borders was responsible for the breakdown of peace at the end of the USSR, and subsequently for the perpetuation of conflict in the Caucasus and in Moldova, and have brought protest, if not sustained violence, to the Crimea. Sometimes conflict was actively provoked by a state building effort - as in Georgia under Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who attempted to develop a notion of Georgian statehood and citizenship as part of the independence struggle with the USSR, or more recently under Mikheil Saakashvili, who returned to the politics of state building after the interregnum under Eduard Shevardnadze when state building efforts were sidetracked. Sometimes the mere threat of a state building project was enough to create a pre-emptive backlash, as in Moldova, where the population of Transdniestria feared some form of ‘Romanianisation’ either through the reintegration of Moldova with Romania or via the development of an independent Moldovan state. In both the Caucasus and Moldova this violent reaction to state building was facilitated by Soviet federal structure, particularly the existence of autonomous republics and regions – Transdniestria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Adjara – within larger Soviet republics that were in the process of emerging

49 For the theory behind this see B. Geddes, Politician’s dilemma. Building state capacity in Latin America, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1-42.
as new states. The existence of these sub-republican federal units gave elites objecting to state building projects a framework through which to mobilise and create alternative krypto-states of their own, especially since they could appeal to the still existing Soviet centre for protection of their federal rights.\textsuperscript{53} Appealing to Moscow enabled them to protest emerging national citizenship by appeal to the greater Soviet identity of which they were still a part and that (at least in Soviet nationality theory) protected their local identity.

Conflict along these lines and through Soviet federal structures was not, however, universal since state building projects were not equally recognised or given an ethnic character at key moments of crisis. In Russia any idea that a Russian national identity might be emerging as the USSR collapsed was ameliorated by the poor electoral showing of Russian nationalists, who were largely tied to the declining Communist Party of the Soviet Union intellectually.\textsuperscript{54} Second, the rhetoric of Russian opposition was not nationalist since it often downplayed the issue of succession. This is best demonstrated by Boris Yeltsin’s famous call for the autonomous republics and regions to ‘take as much sovereignty as you can swallow’, and assiduous courting of these autonomous areas as allies in the struggle with Moscow.\textsuperscript{55} With the exception of Chechnya (and there are several ways in which Chechnya can be seen as exceptional) the break-up of the USSR did not provoke ethno-nationalist collapse in Russia since no state building project was in place as collapse took place, but only emerged after it and then weakly. The stress in official Russian discourses on citizenship is placed on non-ethnic Russian (rossiiskii) citizenship rather than ethnic Russianness (russkii). The compromises over centre-federal relations and the development of an asymmetric federalism under Yeltsin that allowed for the political ambitions and power of regional elites was a crucial factor in the weakening of Russian economic reform, which was at the heart of Yeltsin’s efforts to build up state power relative to that of elite groups.\textsuperscript{56} Regime stability - keeping Yeltsin in power; protecting the power of economic groups from perceived threats from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation; and maintaining the balance of power between centre and federal units - thus out-weighed state building in Russia. Although there was often a push for

\textsuperscript{54} K. O’Connor, Intellectuals and apparatchiks. Russian nationalism and the Gorbachev revolution, (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2006).
secession from below in Russia’s autonomous republics, the weakness of the federal centre and its willingness to compromise its policies meant that local leaders could mediate between centre and republic to moderate demands from below and transform them into resource flows from the centre.

Similar patterns can be seen elsewhere in the former USSR. In Ukraine secessionist tendencies were balanced by the political dominance of Leonid Kravchuk in the early 1990s, who eschewed secession as a central plank of his politics until the USSR was already effectively dead. Thereafter threats of ethnic conflict where diffused in the potential flashpoint of the Crimea by policies of accommodation and power devolution. In Central Asia, there was no mass movement to secession and political leadership in the republics worked to control nationalism. In this they were very mindful of the potential for conflict in the area. In Uzbekistan, for example, the main secessionist movement, Birlik, was pushed aside and its repressions legitimised by of fears violence in the Ferghana valley. The relative absence of nationalist rhetoric, and for many Central Asian elites the absence of a desire for secession, in the secession process made it harder for post-Soviet leaders in Central Asia - as elsewhere - to drape themselves fully in nationalist garb immediately after Soviet collapse. Some development of a national identity was inevitable, not least because de facto sovereignty had to be addressed and that meant the practical management of borders and ethnic minorities. But nationalism was muted and reactions to it less extreme than had been the case where nationalism had been used as a vehicle for political advancement in the last days of perestroika. Part of the reason that reaction was muted was because the outward migration of Russian and other Slavs. Part was because, as in Russia, some distinction continued to be drawn between ethnicity and citizenship. Although there have been language laws and other policies to promote titular ethnic groups, ethnicity has not dominated and driven state building projects in the same way that it did in Georgia. The very multi-ethnic composition of all of the Central Asian states has played a part in this continued Soviet-style separation of ethnicity and citizenship: if ethnicity became the basis of citizenship leaders across the region would run the risk of claims to citizenship rights being made across borders, and raise the danger of low-key localised ethnic disputes becoming inter-state conflicts. Central Asian leaders have

been more concerned to guard their sovereignty and the cover that this provides them in deciding how to structure their political and economic systems to their own advantage to fall in to this trap. They may not have been great state builders, therefore, but they have been dedicated to the post-Westphalia ideal of state sovereignty. As in Russia, there was also cooptation of regional elites to head off opposition. This was less institutionalised than in Russia, but it was still an important means of heading off potential threats, especially in the early years of independence. Later, as power was consolidated in Central Asian regimes, the balance between coercion and consensus sometimes changed. However, by that time the moment of crisis that had allowed conflict to develop in the Caucasus and Moldova had passed and the costs of revolt would have been much higher against stronger regimes.

State building projects have not, therefore, been strongly nationalistic, or at least have not been strongly exclusionary at the most dangerous time for the new states, at the moment of their foundation and immediately thereafter. Whilst this lessened the risk of communal violence it might have increased the risk of political degeneration since it meant that regimes had one less tool at their disposal to bind together their populations. Moreover, they ran the risk of nationalism being used to mobilise against them. Russia is a case in point, as nationalist and communist forces re-emerged as a threat after 1991 and linked up with disaffected members of the political elite in parliament in 1993. This alliance plus Yeltsin’s actions against parliament combined to create the violent events of October 1993. Countering the risk of counter mobilisation meant insuring that elites’ incentives to defect from ruling coalitions were minimised. As partial democracies or proto-authoritarian regimes at the time of Soviet collapse, and with popular mobilisation generally low, other elite groups and members were the chief danger to new rulers: they formed the ‘selectorate’, the group with the political resources to remove incumbents, which had to be mollified if leaders were to survive politically.

Insuring the support of their selectorates meant raising the risks attendant on opposition. In the main this meant co-option, so that elite groups had too much to lose by threatening to break with incumbents or supporting oppositional activity. How far a new leadership had to go to raise the risks of opposition and how far it had to co-opt elites to support it varied from state to state as the extent of consensus

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about the successor regime among elites at the time of collapse varied. \(^{65}\) Conflict was most marked where there was no dominant elite view. \(^{66}\) Presidentialism gave all leaders some powers and incentives to consolidate regimes but they were not able to do so uniformly. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and to a lesser extent and with more effort in Kazakhstan, regimes were constructed consensually thanks to elite continuity, particularly continuity of rulers, continuity of ruling party (as local Communist Party organisations were transformed into new ruling parties), and a relatively high degree of continuity of economic and social power. \(^{67}\) In Tajikistan there was immediate contestation over the regime caused by the collapse of the state and the huge fiscal gap created by the end of Soviet revenue transfers. This led to the privatisation of coercion to capture what scarce resources were left along regional lines and civil war between these armed factions. \(^{68}\) The settlement of the civil war gradually led Tajikistan back to the Central Asian norm: the stabilisation of the regime around President Imomali Rahmonov ended the contestation over power, internalising political struggles within the regime as in other parts of Central Asia, and substituting regime powers for state capacity. \(^{69}\) In Kyrgyzstan, the presidency of Askar Akaev began as a Central Asia’s great democratic and reformist hope but the needs of political survival and struggles over the distribution of resources amongst elites soon saw compromise and personalistic politics replace efforts at building up a reformist and impersonal state that could carry through economic reform in the country. \(^{70}\)


Regimes therefore emerged in most of Central Asia that dominated and deflected state building. In Russia, as in Kyrgyzstan, the process took place over a longer time since there was no consensus over the successor regime and struggles over economic power. In Russia, as has already been argued, the process of state building focussed on economic reform and was derailed in part by compromises with regional elites. It was also brought low by compromises with economic elites. The difference between the Russian, Tajik and Kyrgyz cases and the more stable cases of regime consolidation in the other Central Asian states is explained in part by their different initial political conditions, but also by their economic structures and sizes. The leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were aided in their regime consolidation and had less incentive to reform because of the wealth of their natural resources base and/or because the economic structures of their countries. These meant that they had resources to distribute, greater control over economic sectors such as energy and the cotton economy in Uzbekistan, and spread these resources around more easily across what for the most part were smaller economies. Cumulatively these made their economies regime supporting so that there were few incentives to reform. Initial redistribution of property was more manageable, not a struggle as in Russia, and regimes adapted their institutional structures over time to protect the patrimonial systems that emerged as a result. This did not isolate them from economic downturn in the 1990s, but the regimes were strong enough to be able to maintain an unequal division of wealth without provoking effective protest.

Economic structure and the closed political systems that it has supported is thus one of the reasons that regime building could be used to supplant state building. These circumstances are probably unique in much of the contemporary world. The massive redistribution of property that went hand-in-hand with the establishment of new regimes in the post-Soviet space was probably more extensive than redistributions elsewhere, even amongst many post-colonial states. It also took place whilst market relations were weak so that it was primarily a political process whose outcome was not derailed by market reactions. This gave great power to those at the apex of the new political systems and bound elites to them much more thoroughly. The political economy of post-communism thus worked for regime building in a way that political economies elsewhere in weak democracies/states might not.

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71 Again, this process was more easily accomplished in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan than Kazakhstan and more complete there than in Kyrgyzstan or Russia. See below and the comparisons between Russia and the Central Asian states in R.M. Auty and I. de Soysa, ‘Incentives to reform in the Caucasus and Central Asian political states’, in R.M. Auty and I. de Soysa (eds) Energy, wealth and governance in the Caucasus and Central Asia, (London: Routledge, 2006), 135-151.

72 A good example of this is the way that there has been manipulation of electoral systems to deal with elite changes over time. For a discussion of this in Kazakhstan see R. Isaacs, Between informal and formal politics: neopatrimonialism and party development in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, PhD thesis, (Oxford, Oxford Brookes University, 2009).
External factors also helped. Economically the area was aided by subsidies from Russia in the early 1990s, both direct (through transfers and through Russia lifting debt burden from them) and indirect (all exported their inflation to Russia). This gave them some breathing space in the first years of independence whilst property was being distributed amongst elites and regimes consolidated. After the initial redistribution of property in the 1990s the stability of regimes in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan was aided by high energy prices and by the growth of Russia’s economy.73

External economic support for regimes has been matched by the security rents that post-Soviet regimes have enjoyed. There has not been an analogous withdrawal of great power support from the post-Soviet space as is claimed for Africa.74 Although Russia suffered a loss of power, territory and prestige in the wake of the USSR’s collapse it did not withdraw as completely from its former ‘colonies’ in the same way that some other states (for example Portugal) did during decolonisation, or curtail relations that supported statehood as has been posited for post-Cold War Africa. Russia has remained involved in the security of post-Soviet space in various ways and to varying degrees, either directly or as a part of some sort of collective security arrangement. Indeed, one could argue that there has been a surfeit of security arrangements since the collapse of the USSR, some organised multilaterally through the Commonwealth of Independent States or with other regional powers (such as the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, which includes China with Russia and the Central Asian states), some bilaterally between Russia and states in the region, such as the 2006 security treaty with Uzbekistan. On top of this there has been the involvement of the USA, especially post-9/11 and the war in Afghanistan, and NATO (through Partnership for Peace) in the area. This ‘game’ of security in Central Asia, as it has been labelled, has not resolved many of the security issues in the region in that it has not resolved the threat of breakdown in Afghanistan nor ended the narcotics and other smuggling rackets in the region. However it has meant that some of the costs that are expected to fall on weak states when outside powers reduce their commitment to them have not been borne by post-Soviet states. Their statehood has been guaranteed by international agreement and by Russian commitment to the area, no matter that the latter in particular may be self-serving and destructive of other aspects of sovereignty.

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74 The withdrawal of external support is not straightforward for Africa either; see van de Walle, ‘The economic correlates of state failure’, 108-110.
The gains from these external guarantees of statehood have sometimes been direct and tangible, and sometimes not. Tangible and direct benefits to the regimes of the region include such things as the revenue that Kyrgyzstan has accrued through leasing the Manas air force base to the USA, a rental equal to seven to 10 per cent of Kyrgyz GDP (the rental also helped secure largesse from Moscow in early 2009, which was subsequently balanced by rent increase from the USA), or the increases in military and other aid that flowed to the region post-9/11 as the USA increased its presence in the region. Uzbekistan in particular has been very keen to play-off the USA and Russia. Security guarantees have meant that war has not had to make the state in Central Asia. Although it is difficult to measure Central Asian military spending on balance it seems to have been comparatively low for most of their independent history, rising slightly over the last few years because of the economic growth generated by Russia’s boom and by higher energy prices. In other words, there has not been a need to build up state capacity in the region to build up armies to deal with security threats; instead leaders have been left to use economic resources to support their regimes. This is despite the often-parlous state of relations within the regions over borders and cross-border trade, and water resources and their transit. These have not resulted in a build-up of military strength commensurate to deal with them in large part because such strength could not be used because of the reaction of Russia and China.

More intangible benefits of the region’s security arrangements have been the protection of regimes from threats and hence deadened the development of conflict. The presence of Russian – and to a lesser extent other forces – in the region probably lessens the risk of internal conflict. Occasionally this reduction has been explicitly invoked. The Russian-Uzbek security treaty signed after the events in Andijan in 2005 provides for Russian intervention in Uzbekistan to suppress threats to the regime there. More generally, it is the case elsewhere in the world that coups are discouraged by the presence of foreign troops, or by implicit support of a major military power such as Russia, which is still in the region. Russia and the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation have also worked politically to stabilise the regimes of Central Asia.

79 Collier, Wars, guns, and votes, 86-87.
80 T. Ambrosio, ‘Catching the “Shanghai Spirit”: How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization promotes authoritarian norms in Central Asia’, Europe-Asia Studies 60 (2008), 1321-1344, and
Conclusion

Prophecies of conflict in the post-Soviet space have so far not been fulfilled. The existence of weak states and weak (at best) democracies have not on their own been enough to tip the region, or parts of it, into conflict, despite predictions that draw analogies between these phenomena and conflict in other parts of the globe. The post-Soviet cases show that something extra needs to be added to the mix to push weak states and weak democracies over the edge and into conflict, and that some factors, such as the redistribution of economic resources when it is on the scale of post-Soviet redistribution, might help to avert conflict. So far the post-Soviet cases have avoided the abyss and in large measure this is because they have held back on state building policies. These policies would have alienated parts of their populations, or divided elites and made them mobilise against one another, and potentially, as in models that see elites in weak democracies using nationalism to shore up their domestic position, turned post-Soviet states against each other.

Is the substitution of regime for state building and the avoidance of conflict sustainable over time? The extent to which post-Soviet countries have been able to avoid harsh choices varies and so too will their ability to maintain this pattern of development and relative peace in the future. Some of the circumstances that may have helped them avoid conflict in the past are probably not going to be available to them in the future. The redistribution of property will be difficult to achieve again without violence, for example. Moreover, avoiding state building may be inherently unstable. The Russian and the Kyrgyz cases show the instability that can come with regimes dominating and supplanting state building. In Russia, the relationship between Yeltsin, regional and economic elites weakened economic reform efforts and were in part responsible for the 1998 economic crisis.81 In Kyrgyzstan the derailing of reform in the 1990s led to a huge build-up of foreign debt as the country traded on its reputation as the most progressive Central Asian state. This debt placed the economy and presidency of Akaev under great strain and was a contributory factor to the ‘Tulip revolution’ of 2005 that overthrew Akaev, and to the 2010 overthrow of Akaev’s successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, as he struggled to deal with the fallout of the international economic crisis in an already weak economy. Neither the 1998 crisis nor the ‘Tulip revolution’ and its aftermath have led to prolonged conflict. In Russia the 1998 economic crisis was followed by a fresh effort at regime building under Vladimir Putin that was supposed to create the


basis for a renewed round of state building. This was to include the cleaning up of corruption, the reassertion of federal control over the regions, the subjugation of economic elites to political authorities, the generation of new forms of growth led by state agencies and development plans. In Kyrgyzstan Bakiyev managed to use electoral manipulation, threats and coercion to stabilise his regime for a time. His successors are leaning heavily on Russia to try to achieve the same ends, another sign that Russia has not acted in the same way as some other post-imperial powers.

Both the Russian and Kyrgyz regimes (initially in the latter’s case) were fortunate that their crises occurred as international economic and political factors gave their economies a fillip so that crisis segued into economic growth and state building did not have to be pushed home aggressively.82 Once again then, regime building was more successful than state building, but whilst this remains the case across the post-Soviet space the potential for crisis remains great. Crisis, when it comes, might be of a regime (a succession crisis, for example)83, of the state (a fiscal crisis like that of 1998, or like that of post-Akaev Kyrgyzstan), or some combination of both (like the ‘Tulip revolution’). There is no necessary reason why crisis might not be solved, of course, or that fortuitous circumstance could intervene as it did for the Russians to save the day. But even saying that points, finally, to the very contingent and fragile nature of factors preventing a slide in to conflict in large parts of the post-Soviet space. In short, expectations of conflict within the former Soviet Union have been wrong so far but that is no reason to be confident that they will always be wrong.

83 See Olcott, Central Asia’s second chance, 124-172, on the succession problems in Central Asia.
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