Live and Let Live:
Explaining Long-Term Truces in Separatist Conflicts

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Abstract

Policymakers and scholars generally assume that, unlike in interstate wars, in civil conflicts opposing forces cannot simply "agree to disagree:" in order to stop fighting, one side must collapse, disarm, or concede. I argue that this assumption largely holds for center-seeking conflicts, but not for separatist conflicts. Because separatist conflicts involve more geographically contained fighting and more limited stakes, rebels and states can more easily transition into cooperation. To test this argument, I create an original worldwide dataset of *long-term truces* in civil conflicts (1989-2015). That is, cases in which governments and rebels transition from open fighting to peaceful cooperation for an extended period without either side collapsing, disarming, or conceding. Overall, I find strong support for the main contention: while such truces are exceedingly rare in center-seeking conflicts, they have happened in more than one-third of separatist conflicts since 1989. Even where rebels are strong or have little public support, separatist aims open space for containment and cooperation. These findings help fill in the empirical gaps between war and peace and document cases of peaceful cooperation without disarmament or political reform. They also highlight key differences between peacebuilding in center-seeking and in separatist conflicts.

Key words: Truce Agreements, Civil Conflict, Separatist Conflict

1 Introduction

Work on intrastate conflict often starts from the assumption that long-run peace is impossible to achieve unless one side collapses, disarms, or concedes. As Walter puts it, "The key difference between interstate and civil war negotiations is that adversaries in a civil war cannot retain separate, independent armed forces if they agree to settle their differences."[1] That is, opposing forces in a civil conflict cannot simply "live and let live:" in order to have any sort of lasting peace, it is necessary to restore a monopoly on the use of force. This generalization helps explain why, compared to interstate conflicts, intrastate conflicts are more violent, last longer, and less often end in a peace agreement.[2] If brokering peace requires that one side disarm, then the other side cannot credibly commit not to renege on their promises and both sides must fight to win.[3]

Many conflicts, however, have paused for years or decades with both sides armed and active. In India and Myanmar, numerous long-running separatist insurgencies have paused for decades following de jure or de facto ceasefires. Government officials still refer to rebels as "terrorists" and rebels refer to state security forces as "foreign invaders," yet they coexist side-by-side for decades.[4] In the "frozen conflicts" of Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan, civil wars raged for a few years and then halted in semi-permanent stalemate. Rebels established de facto states, transitioning ragtag rebels into standing armies as a permanent counterbalance to state security forces.[5] Even during the brutal insurgencies in Chechnya and Northern Sri Lanka, there were years-long periods of ceasefire in which there was faint attempt at a permanent settlement. All the while, rebels and

1. Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (1997): 335–364.

2. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90; Bethany Lacina, "Explaining the Severity of Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 2 (2006): 276–289

3. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement"; James D. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer than Others?," *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 275–301; Alex Weisiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts* (Cornell University Press, 2013)

4. Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Oxford India, 2007); Ashild Kolas, "Naga Militancy and Violent Politics in the Shadow of Ceasefire," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 6 (2011): 781–792

5. Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics* 53, no. 4 (2001): 524–552; Dov Lynch, "De facto 'States' Around the Black Sea: The Importance of Fear," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 7, no. 3 (2007): 483–496; Adrian Florea, "De Facto States: Survival and Disappearance (1945-2011)," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2017): 337–351

government forces maintained peace while readying their forces for eventual war.[6]

These cases are often classified as separate phenomena – ceasefires, stalemates, and frozen conflicts – yet they follow a common pattern. Government and rebel forces transition from active conflict into what Staniland calls an order of "limited cooperation."[7] That is, armed forces cooperate insofar as it is necessary to reduce violence but not to co-govern or ally against a common foe. These transitions, from active conflict to limited cooperation without either side disarming or conceding, I call *long-term truces*.

In this paper, I ask whether these transitions from civil conflict to peaceful cooperation are easier in some conflicts than they are in others. In particular, I argue that rebels and states can more easily halt bloodshed in separatist conflicts than in center-seeking conflicts. If rebels are seeking to overthrow or influence the central government, restoring a credible peace becomes extremely challenging once conflict is underway. If, by contrast, rebels are seeking to establish an autonomous or separatist region, it is much easier to transition into durable cooperation. This is true for two main reasons. First, unlike center-seeking rebels, separatist rebels generally operate in a limited, well-defined geographic region. This makes it easier for governments to establish de facto borders with rebels, or at least to agree on clear limits on rebel activity. Second and more importantly, separatist rebels have credibly limited ambitions. If a pause in fighting might advantage rebels, governments can never be certain that center-seeking rebels will not use such an advantage to overthrow the government entirely. Separatist rebels, by contrast, are generally not existential threats to governments because they at most want to establish a separate state. These limited ambitions opens up room for cooperation and containment, especially for governments facing more pressing security threats elsewhere.

In order to explore the conditions of conflict reduction and evaluate this argument, I present an original worldwide dataset of long-term truces in civil conflicts in the post-Cold War era (1989-2015). I identify cases that have two basic features. First, fighting halts or substantially

6. Zachariah Mampilly, "A Marriage of Inconvenience: Tsunami Aid and the Unraveling of the LTTE's and GoSL's Complex Dependency," *Civil Wars* 11, no. 3 (2009): 302–320

7. Paul Staniland, "Armed Politics and the Study of Intrastate Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 4 (2017)

declines for at least two years, marking a major transition from conflict to peace. Second, no major state or rebel force collapses, disarms, or concedes to enable this peace. Instead, states and rebels simply agree to disagree, whether as part of a de jure ceasefire or a de facto change in posture. These cases seem counterintuitive, but they are remarkably common: I find 30 cases across 25 civil conflicts. Few of these truces result in a long-term settlement, and most last at least ten years before widespread violence resumes. In more than two dozen civil conflicts, governments and rebels maintained peace for years without any major attempt to restore a monopoly on the use of force.

These data make two major contributions to discussions of conflict and peacebuilding. First, they demonstrate that separatist conflicts are far more ripe for long-term truces than are center-seeking conflicts. Since 1989, nearly one in three separatist conflicts (24 out of 66) has experienced a long-term truce. By contrast, only one center-seeking conflict (1 out of 64) has seen a truce during the same period. Moreover, this dramatic difference does not appear to be explained by rebel strength or foreign intervention. Separatist conflicts are no more likely to experience a truce when rebels are weak or backed by foreign supporters. Instead, there is stronger evidence that the key difference is in separatist rebels' limited reach. Nearly every substantial separatist conflicts involve an ethnic minority with a clearly-defined geographic region, and most long-term truces explicitly provide for zones of rebel control. These results emphasize the importance of the basic goals of rebellion to violence and peacebuilding. They help to explain why so many separatist conflicts simmer for long periods with so little violence and so many others end with no disarmament or clear resolution. On both counts, separatist conflicts are somewhere in between center-seeking and interstate conflicts.

Second, these data help clarify the ill-defined space between conflict and peace. As recent work has shown, work on conflict and peacebuilding often loses key insights by relying too heavily on the dichotomy of war and peace. Work on conflict often assumes that war is purely a contest between rebels and governments, ignoring the important variation in violence and cooperation over

space and time.[8] Meanwhile, work on peacebuilding often excludes cases when states and rebels cooperate to reduce violence without disarming either side or resolving key incompatibilities.[9] By defining and identifying a set of long-term truce cases, this paper demonstrates how broad this phenomenon is and lays the groundwork for future study.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 lays out the main argument and describes how it relates to the common understanding of civil conflict endings. Section 3 introduces the cross-national dataset and the methodology behind it, laying out the many diverse cases of long-term truces in the post-Cold War era. Section 4 evaluates the main argument, demonstrating the dramatic difference between separatist and center-seeking conflicts and exploring the mechanisms behind it. Section 5 concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for scholarly and policy debates.

2 Argument

2.1 Long-Term Truces and Peacebuilding

Recent work in peace and conflict, most notably by Arjona and Staniland, has shown that states can have a wide variety of relationships with militant groups.[10] Most states are home to dozens of non-state armed groups, few of whom are actively fighting the government at any given time.[11] Even once a conflict is underway, total war between rebels and state security forces is the exception rather than the rule; more often states choose to contain or cooperate with rebels in limited ways. In particular, Staniland calls attention to the many periods in which states are engaging in "limited cooperation" with rebel groups.[12] In these cases, states cooperate with rebels insofar as it is necessary to halt or substantially reduce violence, but not to co-govern or to fight common enemies.

8. Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)
9. Paul Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 243
10. Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War*; Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders"
11. Iris Malone, "Uncertainty and Civil War Onset" (Paper presented at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2018)
12. Staniland, "Armed Politics and the Study of Intrastate Conflict"

Many cases of limited cooperation are not theoretically surprising. Most militant groups never threaten state security. Even during a civil conflict, a state might cooperate with one faction while fighting another in an effort to "divide and conquer" a rebel movement.

This paper instead asks when states and rebels can pause an active conflict entirely, transitioning from open conflict into peaceful coexistence. Since 1989, these sorts of transitions have occurred in Nagaland (India), Casamance (Senegal), Transnistria (Moldova), and Muslim Mindanao (Philippines). In these cases, governments and rebels stopped fighting without major forces on either side either side collapsing, disarming, or conceding. Instead, rebels agree to halt attacks on government forces in the short run, and government forces permit rebels to carry arms, recruit new members, and sometimes to take part in local governance. I refer to these transitions as *long-term truces*, but in practice they often involve no explicit agreement. A government might quietly redeploy troops out of a conflict zone, announce a peace agreement that conspicuously never disarms rebels or concedes any power, or sign a short-term ceasefire and quietly extend it year after year. In these cases, however, the basic understanding is the same: both sides stop fighting, but neither concedes or disarms.

These long-term truces are important in part because they undercut the common assumption that opposing forces in a civil conflict cannot restore a durable peace while both maintaining armed forces. This assumption has shaped scholarly and policy work on conflict and peacebuilding in important ways. First, it has led both scholars and policymakers to focus peacebuilding efforts on ways to disarm rebels without raising commitment problems rather than on reducing violence per se. For example, much of the work on peace agreements has evaluated the efficacy of peacekeeping, third-party guarantees, or large-scale political reforms.[13] Long-term truces represent a second, largely overlooked avenue for peacebuilding. Even if limited cooperation does not end

13. Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Virginia Page Fortna, "Where Have All the Victories Gone? War Outcomes in Historical Perspective" (Paper Prepared for the American Political Science Association Conference, 2004); Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations* (Princeton University Press, 2006); Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 27–47; Severine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Aila M. Matanock, *Electing Peace: Credibly Transitioning from Civil Conflict to Political Participation* (Cambridge University Press, 2017)

a conflict permanently, it may dramatically reduce violence for extended periods. Second, this assumption has led scholars and policymakers to ignore armed groups that are not actively fighting the state. Datasets of armed groups, for example, often do not follow militants who are not actively fighting the government, even in the years between spates of violence.[14] Yet armed groups often play important roles in civilian life and governance after a conflict pauses.

Why would a state ever want to tolerate rebels so openly after years of fighting? Prior work on "frozen conflicts" often emphasizes the role of foreign meddling.[15] For instance, the threat of Russian intervention certainly contributed to the governments of Georgia and Moldova to accept long-term truces in the early 1990s. More often, however, states simply face more important security priorities elsewhere. States with multiple armed movements may tolerate one as a nuisance while redirecting forces to more important priorities. Following the 8888 democracy protests in Myanmar,[16] for example, the military government began ceasefire talks with several major ethnic separatist movements in order to redirect forces to the more proximate threat.[17] However, as Staniland argues, states' priorities may have as much to do with their governing ideology as with rebels' strength or proximity.[18] Prior to 1986, the Philippines' anti-Communist military government fought a brutal campaign against CPP-NPA insurgents they saw as an existential threat. Since the transition to democracy, Philippine governments which have followed have been much more content to contain Communist armed groups. Even if governments are comfortable with ignoring rebels, however, it does not always open the door to a peace agreement. Making de jure concessions to rebels may set precedent for more important conflicts. The Government of India, for example, has been reticent to make concessions to separatist rebels in the Northeast lest it embolden Kashmiri insurgents.[19] Instead, governments often prefer to kick the can down the road rather than settle a situation officially.

14. Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders"

15. King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States"; Lynch, "De facto 'States' Around the Black Sea: The Importance of Fear"

16. Then Burma.

17. Tom Kramer, *Neither War Nor Peace: The Future of the Cease-Fire Agreements in Burma* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute Reports, 2009)

18. Paul Staniland, "Militias, Ideology, and the State," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2016): 770–793

19. Author interview with think-tank analyst, New Delhi, July 2015

2.2 Separatism and Long-Term Truces

Even if states have an interest in halting and deferring conflict, they should have trouble doing so in certain types of civil conflicts. In particular, I argue that long-term truces should be easier to begin and maintain during separatist conflicts than they are in center-seeking conflicts. That is, cooperation should be easier when rebels' main claim is to a territorially-limited group rather than to the state as a whole.

> ***H1:*** *Separatist conflicts should be much more likely than center-seeking conflicts to end or pause in a long-term truce.*

I propose two main mechanisms, characteristics of separatist conflicts which should make transitions to peaceful coexistence easier.

First, separatist conflicts tend to be fought in reasonably well-defined territories than center-seeking conflicts do, enabling states and rebels to better coordinate on zones of control. Because separatist movements rally around a regional identity, they tend to operate primarily in and around the contested region. This means that states and rebels can more easily define zones of operation during a truce, coordinating activities to prevent unnecessary violence. Borders frequently play this role in international peacebuilding, reducing incidental contact and helping both sides determine whether the other side has violated the terms of the peace.[20] It is unsurprising, then, that peacebuilders in intrastate conflicts frequently attempt to physically separate warring parties and create a clear border.[21] As Waterman highlights in this volume, ambiguity over rebel zones of operation can be a source of conflict even in successful truces.[22] Whereas this ambiguity is difficult to resolve in many center-seeking conflicts, it is often easier when fighting is confined to a conflict region. This is especially true because separatist conflicts often take place

20. David B. Carter and Hein E. Goemans, "The Making of the Territorial Order: New Borders and the Emergence of Interstate Conflict," *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (2011): 275–309; Virginia Page Fortna, *Peace Time: Cease-Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace* (Princeton University Press, 2004)

21. Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War*; Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict"

22. Alex Waterman, "Ceasefires and State Order-Making in Naga Northeast India," *International Peacekeeping*, forthcoming

far from the capital or other major population centers.[23] Nagaland, for instance, is more than 1,000 kilometers from Kolkata, the nearest major Indian city; it is closer to the capitals of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos than it is to New Delhi. This means that governments can permit rebels to operate freely within their region without putting the center of the country at risk. Unfortunately, borders may be enabled in part by combatants forcibly removing non-coethnic populations. Several long-term truces were preceded by bouts of ethnic cleansing. This mechanism should a clear observable implication in peace agreements themselves. Inasmuch as the terms of peace are observable, they should include some provisions for territorial separation.

> ***H2:*** *When separatist conflicts end in long-term truce, many should include explicit provisions for zones of rebel control.*

Second and more importantly, separatist groups typically have little ability or motivation to operate outside of the region they claim. Movements typically opt for separatism because they are already organized around a geographically-limited ethnolinguistic or religious group. These claims are typically self-reinforcing for a variety of reasons. Demands for self-rule for a particular community tend to attract rank-and-file members and civilian constituents from that community. These members and constituents, in turn, typically favor prioritizing the community over conquering outlying areas. Self-determination also provides a clear template for international supporters and government moderates, one that would be quickly undercut by expanding demands. Therefore, leaders typically have little to gain by taking control of territory beyond their ethnic base.

These forces make it much easier for governments to cooperate with separatist rebels without either side disarming or conceding. Governments that leave rebels alone for an extended period take a risk that rebels use the truce to rearm and recruit, potentially emerging stronger than they were before.[24] In a center-seeking conflict, such an outcome could be fatal for a regime and

23. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2010); James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Sons of the Soil, Migrants, and Civil War.," *World Development* 39, no. 2 (2011): 199–211

24. Hanson argues that rebel groups become less disciplined and more fractious during a truce. Kolby Hanson,

its members. Even if center-seeking rebels have much more limited aims, such as policy or representation reforms, they are often unable to credibly commit to keep those aims. Rebels can and do change their goals as a conflict evolves; a movement that at first seeks to reform the government may decide to overthrow it when it grows in power. Because separatist groups are limited in reach and desire, they can more credibly commit not to expand their demands. As Schultz describes, an actor with naturally limited preferences, especially over territory, can credibly promise not to exploit advantages later on, enabling cooperation to reduce violence.[25] This bears out empirically: while rebels frequently change the specifics of their demands, they rarely switch from separatist to center-seeking goals. In addition, separatism is rarely achievable by military victory alone; formal independence and even de facto independence typically rely on international recognition. Even if separatist rebels come out of a truce much stronger than they were before, the best they can do on their own is establish a de facto state. As a result, governments take much less of a risk by tolerating separatist rebels than they do by tolerating center-seeking rebels. If this mechanism is at play, then the separatist movements should only claim responsibility for a limited group.

> ***H3:*** *Separatist conflicts which end in long-term truce should be fought on behalf of a geographically-concentrated identity group.*

2.3 Alternative Explanations

There are at least two alternative reasons why long-term truces might be easier to achieve in separatist conflicts than in center-seeking conflicts. In the empirical analysis, I will test an observable implication of each.

First, on average, separatist rebel groups tend to be weaker relative to the government than center-seeking rebels are on average.[26] Now, it is worth noting that the differences are small and

"Good Times and Bad Apples: Rebel Recruitment in Crackdown and Truce," *American Journal of Political Science*, Forthcoming,

25. Kenneth A. Schultz and Hein Goemans, "Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model of War," *International Theory* 11 (2019): 344–374

26. David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, "Non-state actors in civil wars: A new

probabilistic: there is substantial variation in rebel strength within separatist conflicts and within center-seeking conflicts. However, if states are more willing to ignore weak rebel movements who pose less of a threat to state security, this might explain differences in the likelihood of long-term truces. If this were true, we would also expect to see conflicts with weak rebels end in truce more generally, particularly among separatist conflicts.

> ***A1:*** *Separatist rebels should involve weaker relative to government forces, on average, than center-seeking rebels, and conflicts should be more likely to end in a long-term truce if the rebels are weaker.*

Second, on average, separatist rebels may invite more foreign support than center-seeking rebels do.[27] As described above, foreign meddling is often cited as a major cause of frozen conflicts, which may explain any differences between separatist and center-seeking conflicts. If this is true, we should again expect to see a relationship between foreign support for rebels and long-term truces, particularly among separatist conflicts.

> ***A2:*** *Separatist conflicts should be more likely to attract international supporters, on average, than center-seeking rebels, and conflicts should be more likely to end in a long-term truce if international actors support rebels.*

3 Dataset of Long-Term Truces (1989-2015)

In this section, I present an original dataset of 30 long term truces, in which governments and rebels transitioned from active fighting to relatively peaceful coexistence. This definition is conceptually broad, including cases some cases which are referred to as frozen conflicts, stalemates, and even ceasefires. The coding process reflects the dual purpose of the paper overall. First, these cases represent an understudied form of conflict ending and violence reduction, one that merits explanation alongside peace agreements and military victories. Second, these cases

dataset," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30, no. 5 (2013): 516–531

27. Stathis N. Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, "International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 415–429

contradict the common assumption that civil conflicts can only be resolved with one side being defeated, demobilized, or beaten into submission.

3.1 Definition and Coding Process

The coding process involved two main steps, corresponding with the two primary defining features of long-term truces.

These codings cover the 130 civil conflicts listed in UCDP over the period from 1989 to 2015. Violence data is much more reliable starting with the end of the Cold War, especially given the availability of events data in the form of the UCDP Global Events Dataset.[28] Prior work also suggests that the end of the Cold War caused dramatic changes in civil conflict endings, with many fewer victories and many more peace agreements than in prior eras.[29] It is likely, therefore, that long-term truces would be far less common prior to the end of the Cold War. The coding was conducted in 2018, so I stopped the coding in 2015 in order to ensure there were at least two full years afterward to evaluate drops in violence.

The first requirement is that battlefield violence must end or halt in a conflict for an extended period of time. In order to be considered alongside other forms of conflict ending or to represent any sort of contradiction to common ideas about conflict endings, government and rebel forces must successfully end or substantially reduce violence. This requirement excludes shorter or unsuccessful ceasefires, which do not demonstrate durable cooperation. In Colombia, for example, the 1998-2001 peace process involved a sustained effort to quell violence, but actually saw an increase in battle deaths. This definition also excludes divide-and-conquer alliances, in which cooperation with one militant group depends on conflict with another.

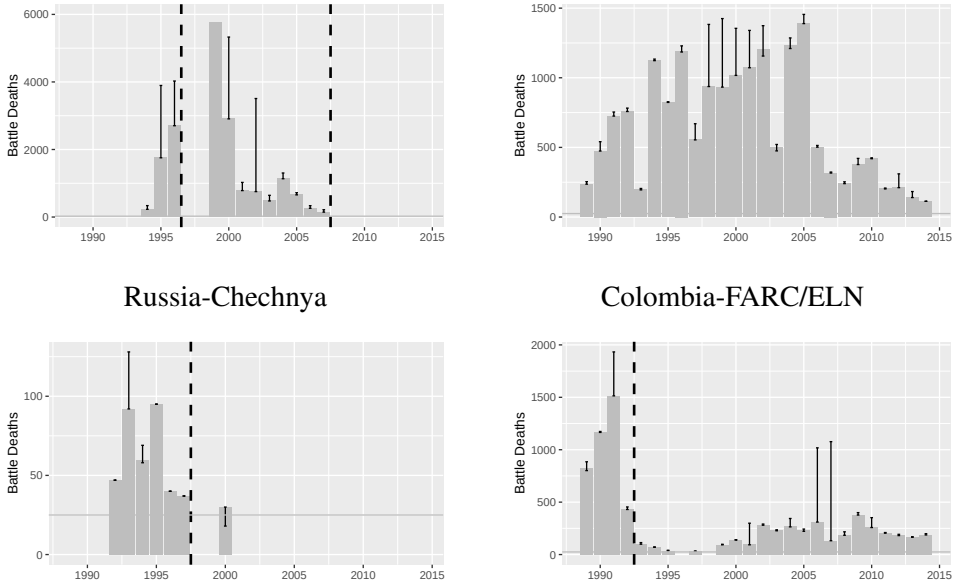
The process started with the 130 civil conflicts listed in UCDP's civil conflict dataset which involved fighting between 1989 and 2015.[30] Within each conflict, I used UCDP data and secondary

28. Ralph Sundberg and Erik Melander, "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 4 (2013): 523–532

29. Fortna, "Where Have All the Victories Gone? War Outcomes in Historical Perspective"

30. Marie Allansson, Erik Melander, and Lotta Themner, "Organized violence, 1989-2016," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 4 (2017); Sundberg and Melander, "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset"

Figure 1: Battle Deaths and Downturns in Four Conflicts



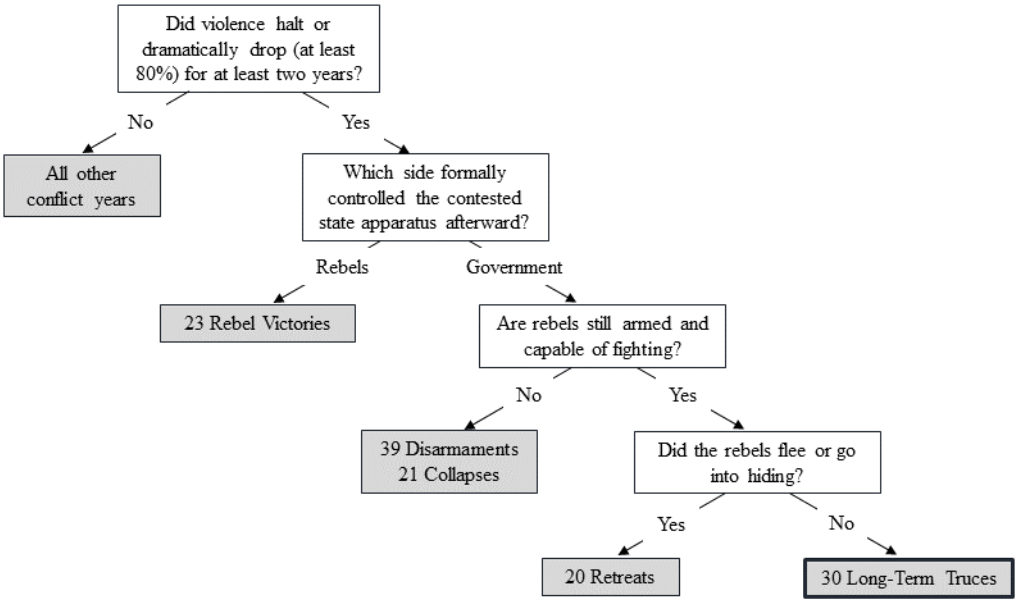
Source: UCDP Battle Deaths Dataset, Version 5
Gray bars indicate UCDP's best battle death estimate, error bars indicate high and low estimates. Dashed vertical lines indicate a conflict downturn, coded by my team (using battle death data and secondary sources). UCDP has a lower threshold for deaths at 25, which is marked by gray horizontal line.

sources to determine if there had been a significant decline in violence for at least two years. Figure 1 illustrates examples of this rule from four conflicts. The basic benchmark was that violence for two consecutive years was at least 80% lower than the violence from the prior two years. That is, the decline is measured relative to prior violence, which is important for two reasons. First, some conflicts are simply larger than others: the most violent years in Nagaland do not approach the least violent years in the Southern Philippines. When battle deaths into the triple digits in the Philippines as it did in 1992, this represents a radical transition. Second, violence rarely drops to zero, even after a conflict ends, although datasets sometimes censor deaths after the official end to a conflict or below a certain threshold. Beyond the violence data, journalistic and academic sources were helpful in distinguishing major declines in violence from periods with poor or volatile data. The cutoff (80% decline) was chosen during piloting based on which transitions secondary sources viewed as significant changes. However, the precise number appears to matter fairly little to the main results – the borderline truce cases, like the clear ones, were nearly exclusively in separatist conflicts. Similarly, the two-year timeframe was chosen during piloting. Many one-year shifts were either data artifacts or considered unimportant by secondary sources, and nearly every two-year shift lasted for substantially longer.

Overall, this process resulted in 133 conflict downturns or endings. These included nearly every case which conflict datasets consider conflict endings, as well as some cases where violence merely dropped for some period and rebounded later.

The second major requirement is that neither side in the conflict had substantial forces collapse, concede, or demobilize as a part of the downturn in violence. This process, described in Figure 2, excludes the three commonly-understood types of conflict ending, in which the parties overturn or restore a monopoly on force. First, it excludes 23 cases of outright rebel victory. In 15 cases the government was overthrown, such as in Ethiopia (1991), Nepal (2006), and Rwanda (1994). In an additional 8 cases, rebels gained formal independence, such as in East Timor (2002) and South Sudan (2011). Second, it excludes 60 cases in which rebels became largely non-functional as military organizations. In 39 of these cases, rebels agreed to disarm or merge into the state,

Figure 2: Coding Process for Long-Term Truces



either as part of a peace agreement or with a formal or tacit amnesty. This includes a few cases where terms were never fully implemented, such as agreements in Angola (1995) and Republic of Congo (1994). In the other 21, rebels largely collapsed, such as the Communist Party of Burma (1989) or Tamil Tigers (2009). Lastly, it excludes 20 cases, like the EZLN in the 1990s, in which rebels fled into hiding or across state borders, effectively conceding the conflict. For each of these criteria, I used very generous definitions of collapse, disarmament, and concession in order to be as conservative as possible in identifying long-term truce cases. So long as any substantial portion of the rebel movement unraveled, went into hiding, or agreed to disarm, I included them.

The remaining cases – 30 downturns in violence across 25 conflicts – are cases of long-term truce. In these cases, violence ended or dropped dramatically for an extended period, but both sides remained armed and active. The only way to reduce violence so dramatically, therefore, is some sort of limited cooperation, even if it is tacit and informal.

3.2 Patterns in Long-Term Truces

Table 1 displays the cases of long-term truce since 1989.[31] As described in Section 2, these data bring together two groups of cases which are frequently thought of as separate phenomena. First, there are the "frozen conflicts" of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Israel, Moldova, Morocco, Russia, and Serbia.[32] In these cases, governments fought short, intense conflicts with foreign-backed rebels, leading to a semi-permanent ceasefire, effectively granting de facto statehood to rebels. These settlements keep both sides armed and active, ready to continue the conflict should an advantageous opportunity arise – as it did for Russia (1999), Comoros (2008), and Georgia (2008). Second, there are many simmering center-periphery conflicts in which violence is generally attributed to state weakness. In thes conflicts – like those in India, Indonesia, Morocco, Myanmar, Philippines, and Senegal – low-level violence can simmer off-and-on for decades.[33] As a result, breaks in violence are typically dismissed as temporary in the "durable disorder" of the frontier.[34] This low intensity, however, can mask substantial variation over time which call into question the traditional view of civil conflict resolution. With Myanmar's indefinite ceasefires from 1989 to 1995, for example, it transitioned from open conflict to peaceful coexistence with a number of rebel groups.

However, the closer one looks at these seemingly disparate groups of cases, the more they appear to have in common. In both groups of cases, the essential promise is restraint for restraint. The government pulls back on counterinsurgency, allowing rebels to recruit, gather resources, and patrol territory so long as they do not attack government personnel. Rebels are granted no de jure policy or power-sharing concessions, but in practice may displace or coopt the state in some areas. Within their territory, rebels may siphon off tax revenues, redirect state projects, or police

31. When a truce ends is not particularly important to the analysis below. However, I coded violence as recurring when casualties return to a level similar to the level of violence prior to the truce (at least 50% of the original). Three exceptions are noted in Table 1 in which a truce ended in one side collapsing, disarming, or conceding.

32. The Cyprus conflict is classified an international conflict rather by UCDP, but might similarly have been included.

33. Shivaji Mukherjee, "Why are the Longest Insurgencies Low Violence? Politician Motivations, Sons of the Soil, and War Duration," *Civil Wars* 16, no. 2 (2014): 172–207, Fearon and Laitin, "Sons of the Soil, Migrants, and Civil War."

34. Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. Kreutz classifies many such civil conflict endings as simply "low violence," with no resolution. Joakim Kreutz, "How and when armed conflicts end: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 243–250

Table 1: Cases of Long-Term Truce, 1989-2015

Conflict	*Years of Truce*
Separatist Conflicts	
Azerbaijan - Nagorno Karabakh	1994-pres
Comoros - Anjouan	1997-2008
Georgia - Abkhazia	1992-2008, 2008-pres
Georgia - S Ossetia	1992-2004, 2004-2008, 2008-pres
India - Garo	2004-2012
India - Kuki	2008-pres
India - Naga	1997-pres
Israel - Palestine	1994-1999, 2009-2014, 2014-pres
Moldova - Transnistria	1992-pres
Morocco - W Sahara	1991-pres
Myanmar - Kachin	1989-2009
Myanmar - Kokang	1989-2009
Myanmar - Mon	1995-pres
Myanmar - Naga	2010-pres
Myanmar - Palaung	1991-2012
Myanmar - Shan	1989-1993
Myanmar - Wa	1989-pres
Philippines - Moros	1989-1994
Russia - Chechnya	1996-1999
Senegal - Casamance	2002-2014***
Serbia (Yugoslavia) - Kosovo	1999-2008**
Somalia - Somaliland	1991-pres
Sri Lanka - Tamils	2002-2006
UK - N Ireland	1994-1998*
Center-Seeking Conflicts	
Philippines - NPA	1992-1999

** Ended in peace agreement*
*** Ended in rebel independence*
**** Ended in rebel collapse*
All others ended in renewed conflict

civilians. Importantly, this peace does not depend on the progress of peace negotiations or on any sort of active cooperation on the battlefield. In most cases this equilibrium can begin with some sort of formal ceasefire, but in others governments build a tacit understanding. In either case, what is on paper often bears little resemblance to the situation on the ground. Within this general framework there is certainly some variation; most notably, whether or not government forces abandon the contested territory altogether. The basic idea, though, is the same – rebels can operate freely so long as they do not attack government forces or stray too far from their sphere of influence.

4 Results

4.1 Separatist and Center-Seeking Conflicts

The main argument of this paper is that conflicts are substantially more likely to halt in a long-term truce in separatist conflicts than in center-seeking conflicts. Here, I use UCDP's definition of separatist and center-seeking conflicts, based on the central incompatibility between the goals of the government and rebels.[35] There are a small number of cases where center-seeking and separatist rebels ally or intermingle with one another, most notably in the Somali Civil War and the upland insurgencies in Myanmar. In general, however, separatist and center-seeking rebel movements tend to be separable and rarely shift categories over time.

As should be apparent from Table 1, separatist conflicts are far more likely to halt in long-term truces than are center-seeking conflicts (as posited in Hypothesis 1). UCDP lists approximately equal numbers of separatist and center-seeking conflicts (66 vs. 64), yet all but one of the 30 long-term truces occurred in a separatist conflict. In all, more than one-third of separatist conflicts which were ongoing during the period transitioned experienced a period of long-term truce. Meanwhile, just a single center-seeking conflict experienced a similar transition to truce: the Communist insurgency in the Philippines. Even accounting for the clustering of truce cases in a few countries, particularly in the hills of Northeast India and Myanmar, the difference is

35. Allansson, Melander, and Themner, "Organized violence, 1989-2016."

Table 2: Truces in Separatist vs. Center-Seeking Conflicts

	Separatist	***Center-Seeking***
Experienced a Truce	24 / 66	1 / 64
Proportion	36%	2%

substantively large and statistically significant.

It is worth noting just how common these long-term truces are in separatist conflicts. During this period, long-term truces made up more than 40% of conflict endings and downturns in separatist conflicts. There were more long-term truces than there were government victories – even when including cases where rebels retreated or disarmed for amnesty. While center-seeking conflicts saw a surge of peace agreements in the post-Cold War era – as documented by Fortna[36] – separatist conflicts saw an even larger surge of long-term truces.

4.2 Causal Mechanisms

The long-term truce cases in Table 1 above also provide strong evidence for the mechanisms posited in section 2 to explain the differences in truce prevalence between separatist and center-seeking conflicts.

First, as posited by Hypothesis 2, long-term truces often include explicit provisions to divide zones of operation. By geographically separating their force, government and rebel actors can reduce incidental interactions and more easily detect cheating. By looking at agreements and at contemporary journalistic and expert accounts, I looked at whether each truce arrangement involved zones of control – either enumerated explicitly in the agreement or clearly understood at the time by journalists and experts. The first column of Table 3 shows the results of this exercise: of the 25 conflicts which halted in a truce, nearly two-thirds (16) included such provisions. In many of the truces – such as in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Israel/Palestine, Moldova, Serbia, and Sri Lanka – states and rebels have created and maintained formal, semi-permanent borders between rebel-held and state-held regions. In others – such as a number of conflicts in Myanmar – agreements include

36. Fortna, "Where Have All the Victories Gone? War Outcomes in Historical Perspective"

explicit promises that governments will respect rebel-held territory, though the exact reach territory is not so clearly delineated. These types of long-term geographic demarcations are much harder to maintain in a center-seeking conflict. Very few peace settlements in center-seeking conflicts, for example, involve long-term zones of control – although many do temporarily. That said, this territorial mechanism is clearly not determinative: there are nine cases where rebel and government forces overlap substantially in their areas of operation.

Second, as posited in Hypothesis 3, long-term truce cases tend to involve rebel movements operating in clearly-defined ethnic-majority regions. That is, the rebel movement purportedly represents an identity group that represents the majority in at least one major administrative region (state or province). Here I cross-referenced the conflict data with the Minorities at Risk (MAR) dataset.[37] As demonstrated in Table 4, 22 of the 25 conflicts which involve a truce are fought on behalf of an ethnic group who are concentrated in a particular well-defined region of the country. Most of these ethic groups are marked as "extremely concentrated" by MAR, and the rest are a regional majority. The exceptions to this rule, meanwhile, are fairly suggestive of the rule nevertheless. The population of Anjouan is not typically classified as a separate ethnic group, but is clearly defined culturally and geographically. Northern Irish Catholics, meanwhile fall just percentage-points short of a regional majority. Ethnic concentration, however, is more a reflection of separatist conflicts in general than something particular about the conflicts where long-term truces occur. Looking at the MAR data, the vast majority of separatist conflicts are fought on behalf of ethnic groups with regional majority status. This makes a great deal of sense: separatism should be attractive only when there is already a clear geographic area which can be separated from the rest of the country on behalf of an ethnic group. By contrast, center-seeking conflicts are rarely fought on behalf of regionally-concentrated ethnic groups. Most center-seeking conflicts are fought along non-ethnic dimensions like class or ideology, which are less clearly defined by region; I could match only 16 of the 64 center-seeking conflicts to ethnic groups in the MAR dataset. Even in these clearly ethnic conflicts, one-third of the ethnic groups were not regional majorities and

37. MAR, *Minorities at Risk Dataset* (College Park, MD: Center for International Development / Conflict Management, 2009)

Table 3: Causal Clues

	Zones of Control	***Concentrated Ethnic Group***
Azerbaijan - NK	✓	✓
Comoros - Anjouan	✓	—
Georgia - Abkhazia	✓	✓
Georgia - S Ossetia	✓	✓
India - Garo	—	✓
India - Kuki	—	✓
India - Naga	—	✓
Israel - Palestine	✓	✓
Moldova - Transnistria	✓	✓
Morocco - W Sahara	—	✓
Myanmar - Kachin	✓	✓
Myanmar - Kokang	✓	✓
Myanmar - Mon	✓	✓
Myanmar - Naga	—	✓
Myanmar - Palaung	—	✓
Myanmar - Shan	✓	✓
Myanmar - Wa	✓	✓
Philippines - NPA	—	—
Philippines - Moros	✓	✓
Russia - Chechnya	✓	✓
Senegal - Casamance	—	✓
Serbia - Kosovo	✓	✓
Somalia - Somaliland	✓	✓
Sri Lanka - Tamils	✓	✓
UK - N Ireland	—	—

Source for Ethnic Concentration: MAR, Minorities at Risk Dataset *(College Park, MD: Center for International Development / Conflict Management, 2009)*

those that are have often seen rapid shifts in coalitions.[38]

This all reinforces the idea that the limited aims in separatist conflicts should enable governments and rebels to transition more easily from open conflict into peaceful coexistence, even with neither side disarming or conceding. When ethnic groups are concentrated in a particular region, rebels speaking for them should have more credibly limited aims. If their identity group represents the majority in the region, rebel leaders and constituents should feel more secure coexisting with the government. If the identity group is concentrated in that region, they should also have less reason to conquer outlying areas. Because of norms of self-determination, rebel claims to short-term sovereignty may also receive more validation from government moderates or international actors. Therefore, coexistence should be more valuable and more aggressive moves less advantageous.

4.3 Alternative Explanations

Meanwhile, there is little evidence for the two alternative explanations laid out in the theory.

First, there is little evidence that separatist conflicts are more likely to experience a truce because so many separatist insurgencies are militarily weak and therefore ignorable. It is certainly true that, on average, separatist rebel groups are more likely to be weak relative to the state than center-seeking conflicts are – albeit with substantial variation in both groups. If this were the primary driver, however, we should expect that separatist conflicts should be more likely to experience a long-term truce if the primary rebel group is weak in comparison to the state than if it is strong. To test this hypothesis, I used data from Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, which judge how strong rebels are in comparison to the government.[39] The top panel of Table 4 divides separatist conflicts by the strength of the strongest rebel group. Contrary to expectations, there is not a clear pattern of states transitioning to truce with weaker rebels. If anything, separatist conflicts appear to be less likely to experience a truce if rebels are at parity with government forces

38. Christia, for example, profiles the shifting ethnic identifications in Afghanistan's civil wars. Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

39. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan, "Non-state actors in civil wars: A new dataset"

Table 4: Rebel Strength and Truces, Separatist Conflicts

Strength of Rebels Relative to Government		
Much Weaker	*Weaker*	*Parity or Stronger*
5/19 (26%)	11/32 (34%)	4/9 (44%)

Government CINC Score		
Low	*Medium*	*High*
4/9 (44%)	13/35 (37%)	6/22 (27%)

Sources: David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, "Non-state actors in civil wars: A new dataset," Journal of Conflict Resolution *30, no. 5 (2013): 516–531, J. David Singer, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, "Peace, War, and Numbers," chap. Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820-1965, ed. Bruce Rssett (Sage, 1972), 19–48*

(4 out of 9) than if rebels are much weaker than government forces (5 of 19).

As a second test of the same hypothesis, I divided separatist conflicts by a commonly-used measure of state strength, National Material Capabilities database's CINC score [40]. By the logic outlined above, one would expect that strong states could more easily ignore nuisance rebels and transition to truce. If anything, the results again show the opposite pattern: stronger governments are mildly less likely to halt a conflict in truce (6 of 22) than weaker governments (4 of 9).

A second alternative explanation is that separatist rebels may invite bolder foreign support than center-seeking rebels do. Foreign support for rebels is a commonly-cited cause of frozen conflicts. Separatist rebels are no more likely to attract foreign support than center-seeking rebels, but it is possible that foreign supporters in separatist conflicts are particularly motivated – either to carve out a buffer state on their border or to support co-ethnic rebels abroad. However, this explanation would still imply that separatist rebels with foreign backers should be more likely to end up in a truce. To examine this relationship, I use UCDP's External Support data.[41] The results, shown in Table 5, show no evidence of such a relationship. Rebels who at some point receive support from foreign states are no more likely to end up in a truce than those with no state sponsor. There is just as much evidence that a conflict is more likely to transition to truce if

40. J. David Singer, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, "Peace, War, and Numbers," chap. Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820-1965, ed. Bruce Rssett (Sage, 1972), 19–48

41. Stina Hogbladh, Therese Pettersson, and Lotta Themner, "External Support in Armed Conflict 1975-2009" (Paper presented at the 52nd Annual International Studies Association Convention, Montreal, Canada, 16-19 March 2011. 2011)

Table 5: State Sponsorship and Truces, Separatist Conflicts

Support for Rebels	
No Support	*Support*
14/43 (33%)	9/23 (39%)
Support for Government	
No Support	*Support*
14/42 (33%)	9/24 (38%)

Source: Stina Hogbladh, Therese Pettersson, and Lotta Themner, "External Support in Armed Conflict 1975-2009" (Paper presented at the 52nd Annual International Studies Association Convention, Montreal, Canada, 16-19 March 2011. 2011)

the government receives support from foreign backers; neither relationship, however, is anywhere close to statistically significant.

In some specific cases, foreign supporters may have played a role in the timing and durability of truces. In a number of cases, truces seem to coincide with changes in the international environment. In some cases, foreign powers appeared to pressure governments into truce by threatening to intervene on behalf of rebels. In the early 1990s, Russia threatened to intervene on behalf of ethnic Russians in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. In the late 1990s, NATO forces bombed Serbian military installations on behalf of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Moreover, there are also cases where truce appears to correspond with the withdrawal of support for government forces. The Philippines, for example, scaled down counterinsurgency against leftist groups following the end of the Cold War, when American military aid dried up. These cases, however, appear to be the exception more than the rule – most cases involve very little foreign involvement.

In most other ways, separatist conflicts appear to be very similar to center-seeking conflicts. For example, the states they take place in are, on average, similarly wealthy and similarly democratic. The conflicts themselves are similarly long-lasting and similarly deadly. Instead, the evidence broadly suggests that the differences stem from fundamental differences between separatist and center-seeking conflicts rather than incidental differences.

5 Discussion

Scholars and policymakers often assume that it is difficult or impossible for states and rebels to transition to long-run coexistence after intrastate conflict as warring states often do after interstate conflict. This paper demonstrates that this is only partly true: while such long-term truces are extremely rare in center-seeking conflicts, they are relatively common in separatist conflicts. Because separatist conflicts have a territorial dimension by definition, they enable states and rebels to more easily establish separate zones of control. Because separatist rebels are organized around regional interests, states can be more assured that rebels will not attempt to overthrow the government if given space to operate. These factors enable states to commit to and preserve a truce at relatively low risk, allowing them to redirect forces and political capital to more important security issues elsewhere. This paper helps inform three scholarly and policy debates.

First, the findings help explain key differences between separatist and center-seeking conflicts, both for how they are fought and for how they are resolved. In assessing the high toll of civil conflict over the post-WWII era, scholars have drawn attention to the large number of long-running, low-intensity, simmering separatist conflicts around the world.[42] These long-running separatist conflicts can simmer off-and-on and undermine state development and exacerbate interstate conflict.[43] Meanwhile, separatist conflicts have proven more difficult to resolve by peace agreement. Center-seeking conflicts have seen a proliferation of peace settlements since the end of the Cold War as international mediation and peacekeeping have escalated.[44] At the same time, separatist conflicts have seen far fewer peace agreements, and conflicts often continue to persist at low levels. This paper suggests both of these are the result of different peacebuilding options available to separatist and center-seeking conflicts. In center-seeking conflicts, violence is difficult to contain and peaceful coexistence difficult to maintain without confidence-building

42. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer than Others?"; Lacina, "Explaining the Severity of Civil Wars"; Mukherjee, "Why are the Longest Insurgencies Low Violence? Politician Motivations, Sons of the Soil, and War Duration"; Fearon and Laitin, "Sons of the Soil, Migrants, and Civil War."

43. Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*; Melissa M. Lee, *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Interference Weakens the State* (Cornell University Press, 2020)

44. Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War*; Fortna, "Where Have All the Victories Gone? War Outcomes in Historical Perspective"

and disarmament measures. In separatist conflicts, states can more easily contain violence to low levels without resorting to more costly efforts thanks to territorial separation and limited rebel aims. In these ways, separatist conflicts tend to look more like interstate rivalries than center-seeking conflicts do – long running, lower-intensity, and open to cooperation. This helps bolster the doubts that Cunningham and Lemke raise about the basic distinction between civil and interstate wars.[45]

Second, the data provide important information to evaluate long-term truces, which have long been overlooked as a potentially durable form of conflict resolution. The view described by Walter has been very useful in highlighting the serious commitment problems that governments and rebels face in restoring peace. Yet this article emphasizes that separatist conflicts present additional opportunities for more achievable, modest cooperation between states and rebels. Rather than disarming rebels in exchange for permanent reforms, governments and rebels can commit to coexist, remaining armed and leaving the door open for renegotiation. This type of arrangement resolves many of the commitment issues described by Walter, potentially requiring less trust and third-party support. It is worth asking, then, if these types of agreements are more effective at reducing conflict and developing peripheral regions than disarmament agreements would be. The cases assembled in this paper can serve as a starting point for empirical work on the consequences of long-term truces moving forward.[46] They bolster prior statistical work on conflict endings, identifying long-term truce among the many long-simmering conflicts which may bounce above and below death thresholds.[47]

Lastly, these data help define the unclear space between war and peace. On one hand, conflict and post-conflict regions are often a tangle of armed actors with a web of conflictual and cooperative relationships with the state.[48] On the other hand, many otherwise capable states have limited presence in peripheral areas, often relying on local warlords and power-brokers to

45. David E. Cunningham and Douglas Lemke, "Combining Civil and Interstate Wars," *International Organization* 67, no. 3 (2013): 609–627

46. See, for example, Hanson, "Good Times and Bad Apples: Rebel Recruitment in Crackdown and Truce"

47. See, for example, Kreutz, "How and when armed conflicts end: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination dataset"

48. Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War*; Staniland, "Armed Politics and the Study of Intrastate Conflict"

administer the peace.[49] These cases demonstrate that these two types of "ungoverned spaces" are part of the same broader phenomenon, with the same armed actors often carrying over roles from peacetime to wartime to post-conflict reconstruction. By looking at these cases, we can track how these transitions affect the development, governance, and non-state actors in conflict regions.

49. Lee, *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Interference Weakens the State*; Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Fearon and Laitin, "Sons of the Soil, Migrants, and Civil War."

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