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Research Design to Analyze the Effects of State Failure on Political Instability of Neighboring States

State failure is an unfortunate process that has many consequences. Because the international system is interconnected, the failure of one state has a significant effect on other states. State failure can lead to political instability in neighboring states. Neighboring states are states that are close to the state in terms of geography (i.e. borders) or interactions (e.g., trade agreements, participation in international institutions, etc.). Different characteristics of the failed state and of its neighbors could affect the degree of political instability in the neighboring states and the mechanism by which the government becomes unstable. Indicators of political instability include regime change, riots and protests, and restriction of speech/assembly/movement/etc. A possible database that may be useful for finding these indicators (and uniform coding) is the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, which contains detailed descriptions of organized violence.

Realism assumes the international system is anarchy and all states are like units engaging in self-help. Waltz’s balance of power theory states that in a multipolar system, states engage in self-help through the forming of alliances (Waltz 1988). This principle can be applied to determine an effect of state failure on neighboring states. If the international system is multipolar, then the failure of a powerful state would disrupt the balance of power, which could lead to political instability in neighboring states as a result. In contrast, failure of a less powerful state (or a state in a bipolar system) would have less of an impact on political instability in neighboring states. The independent variable for this hypothesis would be power, which would be operationalized as military capability. Military capability could be coded using a resource that measures countries in terms of military strength. To test this hypothesis, we would need to compare political instability in neighboring states of a failed state that was powerful and a failed state that was weak.

Contingent realism focuses on offense-defense balance and offense-defense differentiation as determined by geography and technology (Jervis 1978). Defensive advantage in terms of internally defensible geography could to increased political instability because it is more difficult to protect against insurgents. The independent variable for this hypothesis would be geography, which would be coded as the percentage of the area of the state that is defensible. For example, we could see how much of the state terrain is mountainous. To test this hypothesis, we would need to compare failed states’ neighbors with internally defensible geography to those that did not have internally defensible geography.

Neoliberalism focuses on the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation. States that participate in institutions share the costs and benefits. However, if a state in an international institution fails, it can no longer provide goods and services to its own citizen, let alone bear the costs or provide the benefits for the international institution. From this we can hypothesize that other states in the institution would suffer. Since many countries participate in international institutions, it would not work for the independent variable to be participation in international institutions. Instead, we could look at different types of international institutions. If the institution is a monetary institution (e.g., the International Monetary Fund), its members may not suffer the loss as much as if the institution is a security institution (e.g., the UN). However, international institutions are also able to provide loans to help out countries in need. We can hypothesize that states that are provided loans from international institutions are less affected by the failure of other states than states that do not receive loans. The independent variable for this hypothesis would be loans from international institutions, which would be coded as yes or no. To test this hypothesis, we would need to compare the political instability of failed states’ neighbors that received loans versus that of those that did not receive loans.

Marxism focuses on the struggle between the bourgeois and the proletarians. If a state with a high wealth inequality fails, that could erase bonds of nationalism and inspire other proletarians to revolt. This would lead to more political instability in neighboring states. The independent variable for this hypothesis would be wealth inequality, which would be coded by looking at a country’s GINI index, which is an indicator of wealth inequality. To test this hypothesis, we would need to compare the political instability of the neighbors of failed states with a high wealth inequality versus that of failed states with a low wealth inequality. Another way to look at this would be to consider the means of production. A country with an agricultural means of production might have a different revolt than a country with industrial means of production.

Constructivism focuses on identities and interests of states as formed through interaction. If a state interacts with a failed state, that state’s identities and interests will change as it will be inspired to preemptively go on the offense for its own security (i.e., a security dilemma). The mechanism can be explained using Waever’s description of security as a “speech act”: “By uttering "security," a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it” (Waever 1993). Interaction with a failed state would cause the other state to act as if a security dilemma where one previously did not exist or was not acknowledged. The independent variable for this hypothesis would be interaction with a failed state, which would be coded as yes or no. To test this hypothesis, we would need to compare the political instability of states that interacted with failed states versus states that did not.

Liberalism focuses on trade. If a state that has a high level of international trade fails, that state’s trading partners will suffer. The independent variable for this hypothesis would be the level of international trade, which would be coded as high or low depending on capital flow in and out of the state. To test this hypothesis, we would need to look at the political instability of states that traded with a failed state versus states that did not trade with a failed state. There are a number of different possible mechanisms that could be applied in this situation. For example, a state that fails may choose to defect on a trade agreement, choosing short term gains over long term goals. Because trading is an iterated game, that means other players can retaliate. Therefore, another outcome we might consider is that trading partners of failed states may go out of their way to punish or retaliate against the failed state that defected. We could observe this by seeing if any restrictions or sanctions were imposed on failed states by their former trading partners. Another outcome we might observe would be the difficulty of the failed state to establish trade, since its poor economy and history of defection would severely limit its credibility.

There are a number of probable and effective solutions based on the possible results of these hypotheses. If the realist hypothesis posed earlier is true, then states should be especially careful of supporting each other and providing security so as to prevent state failure when possible. As for the contingent realist hypothesis, there is no corresponding solution because changing geography is impossible. As for the neoliberal hypothesis, international institutions should be especially aware of at-risk states as well as neighbors of failed states so that they can provide loans to mitigate the negative effects of state failure and help restore failed states to order. As for the Marxist hypothesis, the effect of failure of states with high wealth inequality is inevitable, so there is no corresponding solution. As for the constructivist hypothesis, one possible solution might be to avoid interacting with failed states. However, this could prove difficult as isolationism is rarely an effective policy in today’s international system. Therefore, a better approach would be to educate policymakers about the effects of ideas and norms so that policymakers are conscious of how their decision-making might be influenced and therefore better able to rationally consider the best solution rather than rashly following other states’ bad examples. As for the liberal hypothesis, states should choose their trading partners carefully and support the partners they do choose so as to avoid having to bear the cost of losing a trading partner due to state failure. The actions and conditions of one state can affect many others. Therefore, it is important to avoid state failure when possible, and when state failure does occur, it is important to be aware of and working to mitigate the consequences of state failure.

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