

Turkey and Russia Show That Land Grabs Can Pay Off

Erdogan and Putin are shredding the myth that countries no longer tear other countries apart.

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's land grab in Syria, like his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin's Crimea annexation, has met with a weak international response. Will that encourage more land grabs? Any nations thinking of doing so should be warned: Such conquests succeed only if they don't set off full-scale wars.

The U.S. has [frozen](#) the assets of the Turkish defense and energy ministries as well as those of the defense, energy and interior ministers. President Donald Trump also promised to stop negotiations with Turkey on a trade deal and to raise tariffs on Turkish steel. Turkey will barely notice these sanctions. It's likely that the ministries and officials have no U.S. assets,

and their ability to continue using U.S. financial assets through other branches of the Turkish government is more or less unlimited.

The European Union, for its part, [agreed](#) that its member states would commit “to strong national positions regarding their arms export policy to Turkey” — not quite an arms embargo, but a recommendation that European nations stop selling arms to Ankara. This is something Germany, Finland, France, the Netherlands and Sweden have already promised to do. Erdogan could have lived with a full embargo, too: Russia is only too happy to sell him more weapons.

The sanctions on Turkey are even weaker than those imposed on Russia after it seized Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014. That month, [the U.S.](#) and [the EU](#) imposed some travel bans and asset freezes on Russians believed to be involved in the operation, and the Europeans also prohibited all business with Crimea itself. Russia shrugged off these restrictions. Harsher measures, to which Russia responded with some import bans, only followed an escalation in eastern Ukraine and the downing of a Malaysian passenger airliner over territory held by pro-Russian rebels.

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Like Putin before him, Erdogan can rest easy that his country won’t be hit with anything resembling the harsh UN Security Council-authorized [sanctions](#) slapped on Iraq after it invaded Kuwait in 1990. Those included an all-embracing trade and financial embargo.

The weakness of the Crimea- and northern Syria-related sanctions undermines the idea of a “territorial integrity norm” that is supposed to have crystallized in the post-World War II era. The emergence and acceptance of this norm — a general international consensus against military conquest and armed secession — is often credited for the declining number of conquest attempts in recent decades. But the conclusions of political scientist Mark Zacher, whose 2001 [paper](#) promoted the idea that this territorial integrity norm had led to a dramatic decrease in the number of border changes, has been [challenged](#) in more recent research. A causal link between the norm and the prevalence of land grabs is turning out hard to prove.

In a recent [paper](#), Dan Altman of Georgia State University holds that conquest has never really gone obsolete. Instead, he claims, based on several updated datasets of interstate conflicts, that the nature of land grabs has changed:

As states increasingly came to shy away from intentionally waging war, war-prone forms of conquest declined earlier and more strongly. Conquest attempts more consistent with the *fait accompli* strategy and its aim of avoiding war proved more enduring. These tend to target smaller territories, especially those with little or no population and no military garrison that would need to be removed. It could have transpired that states would forgo conquest almost altogether as they increasingly sought to avoid starting wars. Instead, states avoided only war-prone conquest while persisting with comparatively war-averse conquest.

According to Altman, all the states responsible for the nine initial conquest attempts that led to wars — that is, conflicts with more than 1,000 battle deaths — since 1975 ended up losing the conquered territory. But out of the total of 30 land grabs involving parts of states that

occurred between 1980 and 2018, conquest initiators held on to their territorial gains in half the cases. That means the successful conquerors are those who avoid a war.

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Trying to seize an entire country, as Iraq did in 1990, increases the risk of third-party military intervention, Altman wrote. What happened to Iraq after it seized Kuwait also shows that the sanctions in such a situation can be overwhelming. But “the victims of smaller conquests have been on their own,” according to Altman: “Of the 63 initial conquest attempts targeting parts of states since 1945, in only five did a third-party state — a friend or ally of the victim — fire at least one shot in defense of the victim.”

All this makes Putin’s Crimea grab a relatively typical success story for modern-day conquest. It involved little violence, and Putin correctly calculated that third-party intervention would be weak. On the other hand, Russia’s interference in eastern Ukraine is — also in keeping with Altman’s conclusions — more of a miscalculation: It set off a war, and Russia hopes to hand the territories now held by pro-Moscow separatists back to Ukraine if it can get favorable peace terms.

In Syria, Erdogan apparently also hoped for a Crimea-style *fait accompli*. But recent developments on the ground — such as the Syrian military’s intervention on the side of the Kurdish forces, as well as Russia’s insistence that Turkey shouldn’t hold on to any of the invaded territory — show that he may have miscalculated, just as Putin did in eastern Ukraine.

The weak Western reaction won’t force Erdogan to retreat. But the possibility of an all-out war might thwart his plan to clear a 30-kilometer “safe zone” in Syria. He may need to make a deal with Putin and Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. This could involve allowing him to resettle in northern Syria some of the 3.7 million Syrian refugees Turkey has been sheltering and no longer wants, perhaps making Russia and the Assad regime responsible for holding back any anti-Turkish activity along the border.

When it comes to conquests, it’s not clear whether any kind of operational “rules-based order” has ever existed. Putin and Erdogan are just taking more risk than is customary. The authoritarians play for big stakes. Erdogan’s Syria move is a gamble — but not because he can be held responsible for violating some important norm.

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