

Improving Responses to Protracted Conflict:
Why Borderlands Matter for Upstream Engagement

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How do borderlands matter for upstream engagement, aiming to reduce threats to global stability and security that arise from the world's increasing interconnectedness? I show that border areas in vulnerable regions are hubs of protracted conflict that undermine security not just locally, but across the globe. Violent non-state groups take advantage of these spaces to engage in cross-border operations through which they strengthen transnational networks. They also benefit from deficient state capacities in these zones to impose illicit governance structure. Borderlands thus host long-term drivers of instability: they are strategic corridors for transnational organised crime, sites of retreat for conflict actors, and safe havens of terrorists. Employing a transnational borderland perspective, I conclude that upstream operations currently follow an approach that is ill-equipped to address the security threats that emanate from such regions: first, they are guided by state-centric concepts of security that focus on borderlines rather than borderlands; and second, they prioritise governance functions provided by the state, thereby neglecting how governance functions are taken over by violent non-state actors. The article draws on empirical data from a seven-year study including over a year of fieldwork in and on Colombia's borderlands.

Keywords: borderlands, governance, transnational networks, upstream engagement, cross-border conflict, FARC, Colombia

Introduction¹

Global security threats today are intrinsically linked to the world's growing interconnectedness. Some of the most protracted contemporary armed conflicts are characterised by their reach across borders and the involvement of transnational networks of criminals, terrorists, or other violent non-state groups. Borders do not constitute obstacles to illicit economic exchange and non-state military expansion. Indeed, illicit cross-border flows of money, weapons, or ammunitions span entire continents, fuelling instability across the globe. While cross-border movements have long been common, the scope of the activities belonging to the "Other Side of Globalization" is new (Schendel and Abraham, 2005). Local entrepreneurs of violence are superseded by global networks, ordinary criminals join transnational terrorists, and chains of illegal drug, human or weapons trafficking expand past regions to extend across continents (Idler, 2014a, p. 56). The easy availability of information, for example through social media, and the speed with which such information spreads globally, has facilitated human development in some parts of the world, yet it has also given rise to new threats to human and national security across the globe. Novel technologies and the increasing relevance of the cyberspace have brought both opportunities and challenges for defence: conflicts far away can easily have repercussions at home, as terrorist attacks in Europe and the massive migrants' crisis attest.

Despite the cross-border nature of contemporary conflicts, borders and boundaries still matter for defence policies, with two reasons standing out. First, global interactions between individuals, groups, and other entities continue to be shaped by the state system, whose existence relies on the concept of borders. The concept "border" gained meaning with the Westphalian understanding of the nation-state (Idler, 2014a, p. 57). Interstate conflicts aimed at redrawing borderlines and the deterrence of military incursions through borders characterise the state system's history (Andreas, 2003, p. 81). Borders confer sovereignty and territoriality to nation-states, ideas which have become norms embedded in international law, treaties and resolutions (Idler, 2014a, p. 57). Militarised border disputes have declined and, in line with this, globalists argue that the traditional military function of borders has lost importance. However, power politics and boundary disputes still matter (Klemencic and

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Schofield, 2004, pp. 63–64). Territory remains an important issue to understand the escalation and onset of war (Toft, 2014). Interventions in Afghanistan or Georgia demonstrate that neither interstate wars nor military interventions have been banished (cf. Carter and Goemans, 2011). Also more recent events point to the continued relevance of international borders. The Russian intervention in Ukraine, Europe’s concern with securing its external border as a result of the so-called “migrants crisis”, the British government’s emphasis on sovereignty in its demands to take control of its own laws and to leave the European Union’s single market in the context of Brexit, and US President Donald Trump’s wall plans to fortify the border with Mexico are just some of the most emblematic cases.²

Second, the very interconnectedness across borders reinforces other types of boundaries. As Morehouse et al. (2004, p. 7) argue, the “de-bordering” process of globalisation comes along with strengthened nationalism, economically promoted regionalism and the re-claiming of identities and cultural habits, which reinforces existing borders and also entails new boundaries. In line with this, Kaghram and Levitt (2008, p. 24) contend that

globalist scholarship then, is often not fine-tuned enough to capture cross-border agents, structures, and interactions that are not all worldwide in scope. Furthermore, actors are often depicted as so heavily constrained that they cannot possibly react against these universalistic systemic forces.

Indeed, there is a renewed relevance of identity as a driver of conflict. Boundaries drawn along religious and cultural differences as well as along ethnicity have been characterising human relations ever since. They have been particularly pressing on the agenda of world politics after 9/11 (Andreas, 2009, pp. vii–viii), and, in the 2010s, diverse actors on the world stage ranging from the so-called Islamic State to presidents of major world powers have used such boundaries as a (manipulative) tool to gain influence.

While security and defence analysts have been grappling with the tension between an increasingly borderless world on the one hand, and the continued relevance of borders on the other, they have missed to focus on the spaces that are paradigmatic for this tension: transnational borderlands, the spaces that straddle international borders. And yet, reducing the security threats of existing wars and preventing the outbreak of future armed conflict requires accounting for these transnational spaces. Many borderlands of the Global South have been

² The UK’s Brexit white paper (2017) however makes more references to terms such as “cross-border” or “across the border” than “border” itself.

unruly places for decades. From the border area shared by Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Somali-Kenyan border, they have been occupied by insurgent and terrorist groups. The “jungle” in Calais and stranded migrants in Malta show that also border spaces in less vulnerable regions are facing severe governance challenges. And yet, borderlands, rather than borderlines, do not figure prominently in any defence policies.

Similarly, borderlands, especially in the Global South, are often not properly integrated into the national economy. Consequently, the borderlanders’ loyalty to the government may yield to self-interested illicit economic cross-border activities with those beyond the borderline. This neglect also explains why what is illegal for the state may be considered legitimate for those involved (Schendel and Abraham, 2005, p. 4). More border control to reduce such illicit cross-border activities may be counterproductive because it makes them even more lucrative. It also alienates the local communities who depend on these activities to sustain their livelihoods. This is relevant for the effectiveness of security policies. Andreas and Nadelmann (2006, p. 4) note that “concerns over transnational law evasions rather than interstate military invasions increasingly drive the security priorities of many states.” And after all, while intensified state measures may strengthen the control of the borderline, borderlands, the spaces that surround them, remain neglected.

Against this backdrop, in this chapter I ask how borderlands matter for so-called upstream engagement, which aims to reduce threats to global stability and security that arise from the world’s increasing interconnectedness. I argue that upstream operations follow an approach that is ill-equipped to address the security threats that emanate from border areas. As I contend, border areas in vulnerable regions are catalysts of the negative side of global interconnectedness. Violent non-state groups engage in cross-border operations to strengthen transnational networks that undermine global security. They also take advantage of the state’s deficient presence in these spaces to impose illicit governance. From this follows that, if defence and security policies account for transnational borderlands in their own right, they are better equipped to deprive rebels, criminals and terrorists of a place to strengthen themselves, thereby reducing threats to international peace and security. This requires overcoming a national security approach centred on the borderline and instead acknowledging transnational security dynamics in borderlands on both sides of the border; and overcoming state-centric perspectives on governance to also consider governance exerted by non-state actors. I will illustrate my argument by drawing on the case of Colombia’s

borderlands, particularly the border areas shared by Colombia with Venezuela and with Ecuador respectively. Exposed to a particularly protracted conflict, the Colombian one, these areas are paradigmatic for the insecurities that arise in other protracted conflicts around the world, including in the Middle East, Asia, and the Horn of Africa.

In order to account for the protracted nature of the Colombian conflict, this chapter is based on longitudinal research. Between 2011 and 2017, I carried out extensive fieldwork in and on those border regions with more than 600 interviews which inform this study. The interviewees included ex-combatants, military and police officials, refugees, civil society leaders, staff members of international organisations, non-governmental organisations and academics. I complemented the data gathered during my fieldwork with comprehensive reviews of the literature on borderland studies and conflict studies more broadly. To adequately address ethical issues that arise with such sensitive research, all interviews were based on informed consent and anonymity.

The chapter is structured as follows: I will start with a discussion of upstream engagement and introduce the concept of borderlands in order to show how these terms intersect. Drawing on the case of Colombia's borderlands, I will then demonstrate how borderlands matter for upstream engagement, focusing on two issues in particular: first, the cross-border operations carried out by violent non-state groups that strengthen transnational networks, and second, illicit governance. I conclude that upstream engagement needs to address these challenges in order to tackle long term drivers of protracted conflict and related cross-border challenges – that is, to reduce some of the most serious threats to global security.

Upstream Engagement as Response to Protracted Conflict

The world's increasing interconnectedness that came along with globalisation is relevant to defence. Through transnational networks that facilitate flows of weapons, people, ideas, and money, threats seemingly far away can quickly have an impact at home. So-called "upstream engagement" follows this logic: diffuse threats "upstream" are addressed before they arrive "downstream". Put differently, crises and conflicts are prevented, or at least contained, before they erupt or expand.

“Upstream engagement” in defence is an umbrella term that first and foremost highlights activities that place at the root of instability. The term “upstream” is commonly used in the oil and gas industry where it refers to the exploration and production stage of the industry, as opposed to midstream – transport – and downstream – the refining, processing, marketing and distribution of the product. With regard to security and defence issues, there is no clear definition of the concept of upstream engagement. The Ministry of Defence’s Joint Doctrine Note 1/15 (2015, pp. 59, 11) specifies that upstream operations include upstream capacity building and upstream conflict prevention. Capacity building can refer to security assistance to local armed forces, military education or training in civilian tasks such as building roads, bridges or participating in other infrastructure projects. Conflict prevention in the form of military operations is less specific and partly overlaps with capacity building. Policy documents such as the UK’s Army 2020 brochure (Army, 2013, p. 21) refer to it as “overseas engagement and capacity building” which “if properly targeted and resourced, should deliver benefits to the UK and more widely to global stability by reducing the need to deploy in the future on costly intervention operations.” More recently, the 2016-2020 Strategic Defence and Security Review emphasised the importance of “defence engagement”, defined as “Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces non-combat activities with international partners which contribute to stability, security and prosperity”.

Also other governments, though not using the term “upstream engagement” explicitly, have adopted the approach of operating “upstream” as an integral part of their security and defence policies. The German White Paper (2016, p. 39) for example lists “Fragile States and Poor Governance” as one of the challenges for German Security Policy. It identifies “early recognition, prevention and resolution of crises and conflicts” as one of Germany’s strategic priorities. The document states that that

crises, conflicts, failing states, and humanitarian disasters influence not only directly affected states and regions but also indirectly affected states and regions such as Germany and Europe. The earlier crises and conflicts are countered by preventive measures, the greater the chance of preventing escalation and of achieving stability. Germany must participate in the prevention and stabilisation of crises and conflicts as well as in post-crisis and post-conflict management, depending on the extent to which it is affected and its available options (Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, p. 50).

Similar to the British approach, the White Paper (2016, p. 52) highlights that

preventive measures in order to de-escalate conflicts and crises at an early stage [...] in close cooperation with regional and local actors [...] to enable states and

regional organisations in fragile environments to independently assume security responsibility in a comprehensive manner. German and international commitment in crisis regions can be adapted and, over the long term, scaled back as regional and local actors establish the rule of law and gain the capacity to take responsibility for themselves.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an intergovernmental military alliance, is concerned with upstream engagement as well. NATO maintains partnerships with non-member states in order to enhance “international security, peace and stability” among other strategic objectives. These partnerships include capacity building, education and training with a view to preventing crises (NATO, 2011, p. 11).

The high benefits of preventative measures in reducing threats to global security not only underlie increasing upstream engagement efforts in the defence sector, they also underpin change, albeit slow one, in the broader international security architecture. Even though more than forty per cent of conflict prevention interventions fail, the benefits of succeeding are sixteen times higher than what they cost (Picciotto, 2008, p. 16). According to Paul Collier (2008, p. 32), preventing one intra-state war saves USD 64 billion a year in direct costs. This is because an average internal armed conflict would cost two and a half times the value of the respective state’s GDP at the time the conflict begins (Picciotto, 2006, p. 114). Already in 1992 then-UN General-Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992) asked for conflict prevention to be intensified and yet it was only until recently that the topic became more “fashionable”. In 2012, the United Nations Development Programme’s Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) developed a guidance note on “governance for peace” as a major element of conflict prevention (Muggah et al., 2012). Accordingly, governance that is conducive to peace comprises inclusive political processes, responsive and accountable institutions, resilient state-society relationships and strong partnerships across different actors involved in conflict prevention efforts (Muggah et al., 2012, p. 12). This is in line with the more recently set UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this context, the international community set out Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16: “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (UN, 2015).

Neglected Borderlands

Borderlands in vulnerable regions are particularly prone to the convergence of conflict and crime and yet they are largely neglected by upstream operation efforts. Vulnerability arises from fragility and the lack of resilience, features that are particularly prevalent in the so-called Global South. As I will demonstrate below, the transnationality of borderlands makes these spaces prone to cross-border operations by violent non-state groups that allow them to strengthen their transnational networks while undermining local security. Furthermore, weak state governance allows for governance provided by violent non-state actors, and therewith for what I call shadow citizenship: some sort of social contract whereby a state-society relationship is replaced by a mutually reinforcing relationship between a (violent) non-state actor and the local community (Idler, 2014b). As a consequence, these spaces lack exactly those elements that are considered to be vital for effective conflict prevention: inclusive politics, responsive institutions and a resilient state-society relationship.

Williams and Godson (2002, pp. 315–316) note that weak states manifest ideal conditions for organised criminals to flourish: criminals would use weak states as a home bases to extend their operations elsewhere. Similarly, when discussing the difficulties of tackling violent non-state groups, especially criminal actors, Moises Naím (2007, p. 34) notes that “complicating the fight is that these networks are simultaneously local and global”. They are entrenched in local power structures and at the same time manifest international mobility. Borderlands not only comprise weak governance structures as do weak states, but due to their transnational nature, this weakness is also little visible since they are located at the periphery anyways, so to speak. They thus not only suffer from insufficient governance – including the coordination between development and military actors interested in enhancing stability – by each of the states they bring together, but also the lack of coordination across the border between the two states, making borderlands convenient sites for the “glocal” operations of criminals and other violent non-state actors. They are hubs for transnational networks that connect fragile regions and facilitate illicit flows of weapons, drugs, people and money. Hence, if upstream engagement is to mitigate one of the biggest threats to global stability and security, namely, increasing economic and/or political power of violent non-state actors, it should address these “glocal” dynamics.

Two characteristics make borderlands a universal concept: their transnationality and their distance to the political and economic state centres (Idler, 2014a, pp. 59–63). From the

relevance of the transnational nature of borderlands follows that studying borderlands requires a cross-border, or borderland, perspective which considers the area of both sides of the border as one spatial unit of analysis (Baud and van Schendel, 1997, p. 216; Schendel, 2005, p. 44). Understanding borderland dynamics also requires accounting for the relationship between the centres and the borderlands. Borderland dynamics shape state policies that are relevant to territorial sovereignty, a nation's identity and its embedment in the regional context. This approach opposes the conventional view according to which global dynamics shape state centres, and according to which these power centres affect the distant borderlands (Zartman, 2010, p. 9). The power centres would try to expand, militarize their borders in defence or make agreements on cross-border trade which has repercussions on the borderlands (Zartman, 2010, p. 11).

With the following case study, I demonstrate how various violent non-state groups have used the transnationality of Colombia's border areas to engage in cross-border operations while furthering their economic and political agendas through consolidating their transnational networks. I also reveal why borderlands constitute illicitly governed, rather than ungoverned spaces. As I argue, conflict prevention in general, and in the form of upstream engagement in particular, needs to become less state-centric in two regards: first, it needs to move beyond conceptualising borders as borderlines that need to be secured, or defended in line with the idea of national, or external, security. Instead, upstream engagement should address transnational borderlands, and the need for borderlands to be governed peacefully in order to reduce threats to global stability and security. Second, upstream engagement needs to account for governance provided by actors other than the state, especially violent non-state actors. Conflict prevention that is employed in a coordinated approach between development and military actors is necessary to both deprive the violent non-state actors of their illicit authority and hence shadow citizenry, and to foster governance for peace – be it non-state, yet non-violent governance, or indeed governance provided by state actors.

Colombia's Borderlands: Challenges for Upstream Engagement

In Colombia's borderlands, conflict and drug dynamics converge, making them attractive for rebels, paramilitaries, and criminal organisations alike (Idler, 2014a). This is a result of their geostrategic location within the global cocaine industry and related forms of transnational organised crime (Clawson and Lee, 1996). It is also a consequence of Colombia's decade-

long armed internal conflict: they are sites of retreat, reorganisation and operation of the major actors involved in the conflict (Pécaut, 2001). They became the principal war scenes after the shift of the Colombian conflict to the country's peripheries. The financing fronts of Colombia's largest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC) which signed a peace deal with the Colombian government in 2016 operated until recently in the border areas. Being located in border zones allowed them to easily cross over to deal with logistics or supply.³

Bogotá's security policies brought Colombia's border areas further to the centre of the country's conflict dynamics. In 2000 the US Congress approved Plan Colombia, a counter-drug and counter-insurgency initiative developed by the Colombian government which later with US assistance became part of former President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy. Uribe's policies brought increased security to urban areas, but moved the conflict's impacts further to the periphery and beyond. The repercussions of military operations and refugee flows were evident both on the Colombian and non-Colombian side of the border. At the same time, criminal and conflict actors expanded their activities in these regions. This was facilitated by the fact that Colombia's borderlands are the places where the states lost, or never had, legitimacy as a result of severe shortcomings in the bilateral border security cooperation.

Cross-border Operations and Transnational Networks

Borderlands are by definition regulated by several regimes: due to their transnationality, two different jurisdictions and security systems meet in these spaces (Zeller, 2013, p. 194). In regions with low state capacity, multiple forms of regulation make them more prone to impunity: national approaches to border control lack coordination, intelligence exchange is characterised by miscommunication and police cooperation between the two states is undermined by mutual mistrust. Without adequate bilateral cooperation and with the law enforcement agents being tied to their national jurisdictions, crimes are difficult to prosecute. Violent non-state groups legally or illegally cross the border and commit crimes on the other side, but most of the time state forces and prosecutors cannot cross it. In brief, the blurring of two neighbouring jurisdictions offers an advantage for non-state actors in comparison to law enforcement constrained by territorial sovereignty (Donnan and Wilson, 1999). Violent non-

³ Even though the FARC signed a peace deal, as of 2017 the armed struggle of the second rebel group, the ELN, continues. Hence, this article considers the armed conflict in Colombia as ongoing.

state actors benefit from cross-border impunity in three ways. First, they can commit crimes one side of the border and flee to the other side. Due to the lack of intelligence cooperation and the restrictions of state law enforcement officials to their own jurisdiction, these crimes remain without due investigation. Similarly, they can plan the crime on one side, cross the border to commit the crime and return. Finally, they can kill on one side of the border and dump the body of the victim on the other side of the border. In the absence of a body, no homicide is registered and thus homicide rates are lower than actual deaths, rendering violence less visible.

If crimes are committed “across the border” they are less likely to be investigated than within one national territory because the investigation lacks the necessary cooperation.⁴ Many incidents of physical violence and other forms of victimisation are often not reported or prosecuted. Violence is invisibilised by the lack of accountability. Officially “inexistent” without figuring in statistics or reports, these crimes fail to attract the attention of the host governments and of the international community: precarious security dynamics in borderlands are neglected or underestimated by policymakers.

In Colombia’s border regions, cross-border operations by violent non-state actors contributed to the strengthening of their transnational networks. At the Colombia-Venezuela border, cross-border operations reduced the international community’s attention because it kept homicide rates low. Between March and April 2003 for example the bodies of more than fifty Colombians were dumped on the Venezuelan side close to the border (Fundación Progresar, 2010, pp. 86–106). Many of them were buried anonymously on Venezuelan cemeteries close to the borderline. This way they did not count towards the number of homicides occurred in Colombia. More recently, the two main insurgent groups FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) used transnational borderlands to their advantage in yet another way: as of 2016, in the Colombian region of Baja Guajira, which borders the Venezuelan state of Zulia, both FARC and ELN controlled vast territories in which they charged taxes to the local population, decided on rules of coexistence, and in return, let the local communities live without any major security issues – as long as they follow the rules.⁵ Many rebels had moved

⁴ This is a general phenomenon of borders. At the Irish-British border for example, “there are instances in the south Fermanagh area where terrorists literally walked from one side of the border to the other, carried out their heinous murders and then walked back, believing that they would be afforded a form of safe passage and sanctuary” (Patterson, 2013).

⁵ Interviews with local community members, La Guajira, Colombia, 2016.

their families to the Venezuelan side of the border and had bought properties there. There are reports of violent incidents in the Venezuelan border zone,⁶ yet they mostly go unnoticed by the international community. This is because neither the Colombian nor the Venezuelan government recognise the full extent to which those rebels operate on Venezuelan territory. The Colombians do not consider it their responsibility to address those issues on the Venezuelan side and the Venezuelans downplay the threat – or, as some would argue, may even be complicit (Ramírez, 2011, pp. 60–61). As a consequence, while the rebels appear to have lost clout in Colombia, they may in fact use sites of retreat on the Venezuelan side to reorganise and strengthen their transnational networks, not least as this territory is a strategic transit zone on the international drug trafficking route.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere (see e.g. Idler, 2014c, 2012), examples of the FARC's cross-border movement abound. When Colombia tightened cocaine interdiction measures in the Colombian department of Arauca in 2005, the landing strips were moved across the border to the Venezuelan state of Apure. In July 2012 the New York Times reported that 121 tracks of illicit drug flights had their starting point in Venezuelan Apure (Neuman, 2012). At that time, the FARC coexisted with the ELN and the Bolivarian Liberation Front, a Venezuelan left-wing armed non-state group, in Apure (Idler and Forest, 2015). Moving the business across the border therefore allowed them to maintain their income share from the cocaine industry. Similarly, the FARC (and other armed actors) crossed the Colombian-Ecuadorian borderline to pursue their interests and remain unnoticed. They shifted mobile cocaine laboratories from Putumayo to Sucumbíos to evade detection. In other border areas, the FARC charged taxes on illegal mining on the Ecuadorian side of the border. In order to stop these activities, the Ecuadorian military destroyed the excavators, but this had little long-term effects: illegal mining and the FARC's extortion soon continued as usual (Idler, 2014c).

If in such contexts upstream conflict prevention stops at the borderline, it misses an important dimension of the security dynamics. Locally, the actual levels of violence are ignored, leaving borderland communities at the mercy of violent non-state actors. Globally, a state-centred approach to upstream engagement means that the strengthening of violent actors across borders is easily overlooked. Similarly, when violent non-state actors move diverse forms of transnational organised crime across the border to evade law enforcement measures,

⁶ Interviews with local community members, La Guajira, Colombia, 2016.

defence actors miss opportunities to cut off their income sources. As I argue, the national security lens that focuses on borderlines as territorial demarcations that need to be defended cannot capture these dynamics. Instead, a more comprehensive view on security that accounts for transnational borderlands proffers opportunities to consider borderlands spaces that need to be regulated adequately in order to thwart illicit cross-border activities of violent non-state actors and promote legal opportunities across the border.

According to the policy documents cited above, upstream conflict prevention involves strengthening the capacities of local communities, making them more resilient and reducing their grievances. Yet cross-border incidents as the ones outlined here, do not fall under any of these preventive activities. Capacity building of local armed forces as one form of upstream engagement is normally designed to tackle security challenges within a national territory or to defend oneself against a threat from outside, yet it does not account for cross-border challenges as the ones described here, due to the state-centric lens, ignoring a wide range of risks that can become major threats if not addressed “upstream”.

Borderlands as Illicitly Governed Spaces

In addition to being characterised by transnationality, borderlands distinguish themselves by their distance from the political and economic centres which, especially in vulnerable regions, translates into weak state governance. This marginalisation entails the exclusion from national decision-making processes, as well as from the national economy due to lacking infrastructure and communication channels that connect the periphery with the centres (Clement, 2004, p. 54).

Neglected from central governments, borderlands seldom experience inclusive politics, except on the very local level. Institutions are neither responsive nor accountable, or else borderlanders would be offered basic services, infrastructure and economic opportunities that are available in more central areas of the country’s territory. Such shortcomings appear to be in the realm of development cooperation agencies: they can implement programmes to strengthen the capacities of state institutions in such regions. Yet what is often neglected is that border areas are not “ungoverned” spaces where the state can come in to fill a vacuum (Clunan and Trinkunas, 2010). Rather, in many vulnerable regions they are “illicitly governed spaces”: violent non-state actors operating in these territories exploit state absence and take over governance functions (Kalyvas et al., 2008; cf. Mampilly, 2011). They achieve

to establish shadow citizenship and thus replace resilient state-society relationships which are essential to effective conflict prevention.

In 2012, during one of my fieldwork trips to the Colombian department of Putumayo in the south of the country, a peasant remembered his life in the 1990s when the FARC were the only ones who “governed” the region: “At least we had our land, our farm and they helped us feed our families”. The FARC helped build health centres, roads, and provided what they consider justice (Idler, 2014c). Such illicitly governed spaces can exist in any marginalised state territory, but if located in border areas, they are particularly important for upstream engagement which aims to stop security threats from “flowing” downstream. This is because violent non-state groups can use transnational illicit authority in border areas to engage in those illicit cross-border businesses that pose increasing security threats in our interconnected world: drugs, human and wildlife trafficking, which constitute income sources for conflict actors and terrorists; arms and ammunition trafficking to directly fuel conflict; and fomenting a sense of community among the local population that is characterised by being disconnected from the central state because they rely on shared transnational, rather than national identities.

Examples abound. Along the Colombia-Venezuela border, the FARC’s Front 33 was known to operate in the Colombian region of Catatumbo in the department of Norte de Santander. Yet when I visited the region south of Venezuelan Machiques on the other side of the border in 2012, locals told me that the Front 33 is likewise present on Venezuelan territory, entering the country via numerous trails that exist across the porous border. They would control the territory, among others, by charging taxes on ranchers and on shop owners, and control everyday life.⁷ The porosity of the border and the lack of a sense of belonging to the national citizenry are also evident on the Colombian side. When visiting the homes or offices of Colombians in Catatumbo I saw images of Venezuelan then-president Hugo Chávez on the house walls rather than of Colombian officials. People listened to Venezuelan radio since there was no reception of Colombian channels. I was told that, when a bridge was broken, Chávez would have sent money to get it repaired whereas the Colombian authorities

⁷ Interviews with local community members, Zulia, Venezuela, 2012.

apparently did nothing.⁸ Such a situation alienates people from the state and fosters a sense of belonging to a transnational borderland community.

Along the Colombia-Ecuador border things were similar: Ecuadorian farmers in Sucumbíos were regularly called by the FARC to attend meetings on the Colombian side of the border. The FARC informed the Ecuadorian farmers at such meetings about the current rate of the *vacuna*, the extortion money that they had to pay on the Ecuadorian side, and about regulations regarding what to cultivate at their farms on the Colombian side.⁹ Neither Bogotá nor Quito took action to change this situation. Such cases do not fall entirely under the jurisdiction of either Colombia or Ecuador and the exchange of intelligence and other forms of bi-national border security cooperation are insufficient. In the Ecuadorian province of Carchi the rebels' cross-border authority was felt strongly too. When I visited the region in 2012 locals told me that things were calm on the Ecuadorian side, coca cultivation would only be present on the Colombian side. While this was largely correct, I found that many Ecuadorians regularly crossed the border to work in coca cultivation sites during the day and come home in the evenings to spend the night in Ecuador. People would not tell outsiders about their activities since this would jeopardise their livelihoods. They preferred to adhere to the rebels' rules instead.¹⁰ This attitude confirms the special relationship that borderlanders have with the border. It may turn the state into a greater threat to their livelihoods than any violent non-state actor that operates in those regions. Many borderlanders engage in illicit economic activities themselves, independently, in the service of a non-state group or even in the service of corrupt state officials. When the state criminalises the cross-border trade of certain goods, such as illicit drugs, but does not have the capacity or will to enforce this law, smuggling becomes a lucrative business (Andreas, 2009, p. 22). Those involved in smuggling benefit from this gap between law and its enforcement, yet they also suffer its consequences. Often, small-scale smugglers are extorted by those in whose service they work, they are asked to pay "taxes" on smuggled goods and are threatened in cases of non-compliance. These smugglers cannot turn to the state when those operating against the state inflict or threaten to inflict violence or other harm to them, undermining the state-society relationship even further and fuelling grievances against those who leave them without protection.

⁸ Interviews with local community members, Norte de Santander, Colombia, 2012.

⁹ Interviews with local community members, Sucumbíos, Ecuador, 2012.

¹⁰ Interviews with local community members, Carchi, Ecuador, 2012.

Upstream engagement that only engages with state authorities, such as local security forces, misses the reality on the ground: it only captures the deficient state governance yet is not conducive to supporting local community members to escape this dilemma since the very support of outsiders to state authorities only widens the distance between the locals and the state – and risks drawing the local community members closer to the non-state actors who may offer an undemocratic and abusive, yet effective form of protection to them.

The adherence of local community members to a transnational borderland community rather than experiencing a sense of belonging to the national state is not only rooted in illicit economic activities and the protection that the “illicit governors” offer in return. It is also related to economic activities that are licit, yet fuelled by those who govern illicitly. In Ecuadorian Carchi for example, residents legally sold provisions to Colombians, supposedly including to FARC members in plain clothes. Similarly, as I was told in Machiques in Venezuelan Zulia, there was one small Venezuelan border village which prides itself on selling more beer cans than any other Venezuelan village – the customers being Colombian rebels (Idler, 2014c).¹¹

Not feeling part of the national community, citizens may find the shadow citizenship imposed by violent non-state groups more in line with and responsive to their everyday live needs than a social contract with an absent state. A resilient state-society relationship, one of the core principles of governance for peace, and therewith of conflict prevention, does not exist. When borderland communities enter a mutually reinforcing relationship with a violent non-state group, they also “exit” the state-society relationship,¹² calling into question the social contract between this part of the citizenry and the state. This contradicts the conventional wisdom of conceiving borderlands as ungoverned or ungovernable spaces (Goodhand, 2013, pp. 247–249; Zeller, 2013, pp. 193–218). The absence of state governance systems is filled with a governance system provided by other actors, which can either result in institutional pluralism (Zeller, 2013, p. 211), or transform borderlands into illicitly governed spaces.

In conflict prevention efforts including upstream engagement which focus on governance for peace as a major component illicitly governed spaces are often overlooked. The analysis tends to focus on shortcomings of the state, that is, on governance voids that need to be filled.

¹¹ Interviews with local community members, Zulia, Venezuela, 2012.

¹² See Picciotto et al.’s (2007) conceptualisation of Hirschman’s (1972) “Exit, Voice and Loyalty”.

Yet there is hardly any focus on the extent to which such functions have been replaced by violent non-state actors. What is more, state actors and the international community are often not even aware of this. In Colombian Nariño, I learned that in territories controlled by the insurgents people are told not to raise issues related to human rights violations when speaking to officials of humanitarian organisations or otherwise they are punished. Often humanitarian organisations and other “outsiders” are not allowed to enter certain territories thus being unable to verify the actual situation on the ground.¹³ As such spaces are often non-violent because the non-state actors have achieved to control the territory, they are invisible to the outside – even more so if these spaces are transnational, for the reasons I have explained earlier. From this follows that a state-centric approach largely prevents upstream engagement from accounting for non-state capacities and how they may be engaged in a constructive way.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the transnationality of borderlands and weak state governance in these spaces hamper the elements that lie at the core of effective conflict prevention: inclusive politics, responsive and accountable institutions, and resilient state-society relationships. As careful tracing of causal mechanisms demonstrated, this is the outcome of the *modus operandi* of violent non-state groups: they engage in cross-border operations to consolidate transnational networks and they illicitly govern borderlands where state presence is deficient. As a result, borderlands to become business hubs for organised crime, sites of retreat for conflict actors, and safe havens for terrorists.

This study has contributed theoretically to the literature tackling issues relevant to international peace and security. I have shown that upstream engagement from a defence perspective and conflict prevention from a development and peacebuilding perspective strongly overlap in their emphasis on inclusive politics, responsive institutions and a resilient state-society relationship. I have shown that transnational *spaces* (in addition to transnational flows such as refugees, or transnational phenomena such as climate change or terrorism) matter to national security issues. The policy implications are clear: if upstream engagement is to mitigate threats to global stability and security, it should address these dynamics in borderlands with a whole-of-government approach to reduce the economic and/or political power of violent non-state actors.

¹³ Interviews with local community members, Nariño and Putumayo, Colombia, 2011 and 2012.

The Andean region sees a paradoxical convergence of peace building efforts after more than five decades of civil war in Colombia, right next to what could be described a situation of state collapse in Venezuela, mostly ignored by the international community. Without appropriate upstream engagement in the spaces where these two divergent dynamics meet, a crisis may unfold whose repercussions could extend well beyond the South American sub-continent. This neglect may backfire, not least due to the alleged penetration of the Venezuelan state by criminal actors and the supposed links of Venezuelan individuals with violent non-state groups in other parts of the world. High-ranking Venezuelan government officials, for example, are accused not only of being involved in the drug trade, but also of having direct links with Hezbollah, also operating in the tri-border area at the junction of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil. The Peninsula of La Guajira, the region in the north of the Colombia-Venezuela border is home to a sizable Arabic community, mostly involved in commerce. This community has been suffering stigmatisation, especially in the context of the so-called global war on terror due to accusations of links to terrorist cells in the Middle East, even though they mostly distinguish themselves through being honest, hard-working merchants. Yet if the situation deteriorates and Venezuela will face more turmoil, terrorist cells could take advantage of this no mans' land: while the international community focuses on the supposed success of peace deal and what used to be the FARC's strongholds in other parts of Colombia, criminals, terrorists and others, including those linked to Hezbollah, could strengthen their transnational networks and expand illicit governance structures in the region. This would increase the risk of such groups planning criminal activities and orchestrating attacks in Europe, the US or elsewhere in the world.

The cross-border operations and illicit governance by violent non-state groups in Colombia's borderlands, as demonstrated in this case study, also facilitate cross-border migrant flows and constitute an incentive for human trafficking. These borderlands are located on strategic corridors not only for drugs, but also for the movement of people, entering for example Venezuela from places such as the Lebanon. These individuals cross into Colombia, and exit Colombia across its border with Panama, often in the hope to make it to the US. These dynamics already exist, but they may become unmanageable if the Venezuelan situation deteriorates. While some years ago, people fled from brutal violence in Colombia to Venezuela, these flows are now far from unidirectional: we also see a reverse of migrant flows with people fleeing the severe economic and political crisis in Venezuela to Colombia.

Such flows could become stronger with borderlands being at the centre of a humanitarian crisis.

Importantly, while I have discussed the case of the Andean region, violent non-state actors have been accumulating power in borderlands across the globe where state capacities are deficient. And yet, they have not received sufficient attention. When armed actors commit violence against civilians, governments and international organisations follow these incidents closely. However, spaces where such violent groups are equally, or more present, yet where they do not necessarily engage in violence, go unnoticed. Yet these are the spaces where violent groups ranging from criminals to insurgents engage in illegal business activities and exert authority over the local population – without the need to resort to violence. In the case of transnational borderlands, even if armed actors do employ violence this modus operandi remains invisible from the outside due to the cross-border nature of their operations, making local communities even more vulnerable. Accounting for transnational borderlands in security and defence policies is necessary to deprive such groups of social support, destroy illegal businesses and resume governance functions that governments have failed to provide.

If governments and international organisations continue to fit their security and defence policies into templates – states - drawn up on the basis of international borderlines, they miss those spaces in-between where upstream engagement would be particularly efficient since they bundle all the deficiencies that conflict prevention aims to address. And if they continue to base decisions on levels of violence rather than the ability of non-state groups to exercise authority and provide governance functions, they react to events rather than taking preventive action. These groups will continue to attract recruits, support, and income necessary to strengthen their organisational structure and implement attacks. Identifying illicitly governed borderlands and offering competitive economic alternatives as well as basic services and goods in these regions would help prevent conflict, curb transnational organised crime, and tackle terrorism from the root rather than combatting its symptoms.

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