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The International Politics of Incomplete Sovereignty: How Hostile Neighbors Weaken the State
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Abstract Why do some countries fail to govern their territory? Incomplete domestic sovereignty, defined as the absence of effective state authority over territory, has severe consequences in terms of security, order, economic growth, and human well-being. These negative consequences raise the question of why such spaces remain without effective authority. While the international relations literature suggests that state weakness persists because of an absence of war and the comparative politics literature treats political underdevelopment as the consequence of domestic factors that raise the costs of exercising authority, these views are incomplete. I argue that hostile neighbors weaken state authority over territory through a strategy of foreign interference. Foreign interference in domestic sovereignty is a powerful instrument of statecraft that can yield domestic and foreign policy benefits. I investigate the effects of hostile neighboring states through a cross-national, within-country statistical analysis utilizing a novel indicator of state authority, and pair this analysis with a qualitative case study of Malaysian subversion of the Philippines in the 1970s. Together, this evidence shows how this international factor is an underappreciated yet important contributor to weak state authority even after accounting for domestic factors. The study’s conclusions challenge our understanding of the effects of international politics on internal political development.

Why do some countries fail to govern parts of their territory? Incomplete sovereignty, defined as the absence of effective authority over a country’s territory, has severe consequences for security and economic development. In the ungoverned and partially governed spaces from Ukraine to Pakistan and the Philippines and beyond, terrorist and rebel groups have established havens that allow them to stage