The State of Secession in International Politics

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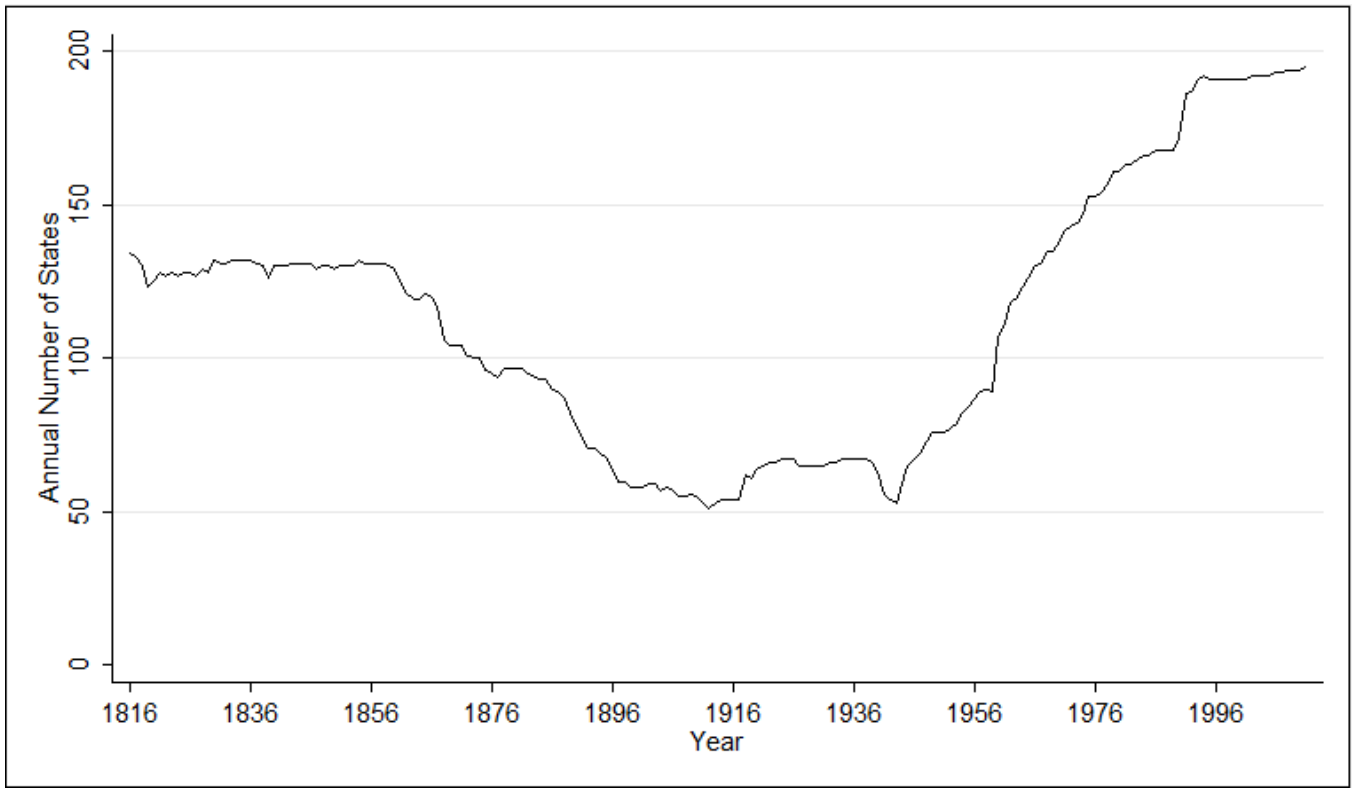
The proliferation of sovereign states has been a defining feature of the post World War II era. One hundred and thirty-one states have been born since 1945, a threefold increase in 70 years. Current events in Scotland, Catalonia, and Kurdistan remind us that nationalism and the demand for independence remain potent forces in international life. As of 2011, there were 55 secessionist movements around the world, and many more potential movements that have not yet mobilized. We are living in an age of secession.

The dynamics of secession are shaped by three interacting factors: the interests of states, the international recognition regime, and the strategies of secessionist movements. Sovereign states are the gatekeepers in global politics and they determine, for the most part, which secessionist movements will be recognized as independent states. However, as I argue in my forthcoming book, their interests have varied over time. Prior to 1945 there was a long trend in international life toward fewer and fewer states (see Figure 1). This was particularly so in the period from 1860 to 1914, when the number around the world was reduced to unprecedented levels. This era was consonant with the German and Italian unifications in Europe and the mostly European imperial acquisitions abroad, and merely the tail end of a more than 500-year process of political consolidation in regions like Europe and Southeast Asia.[1]

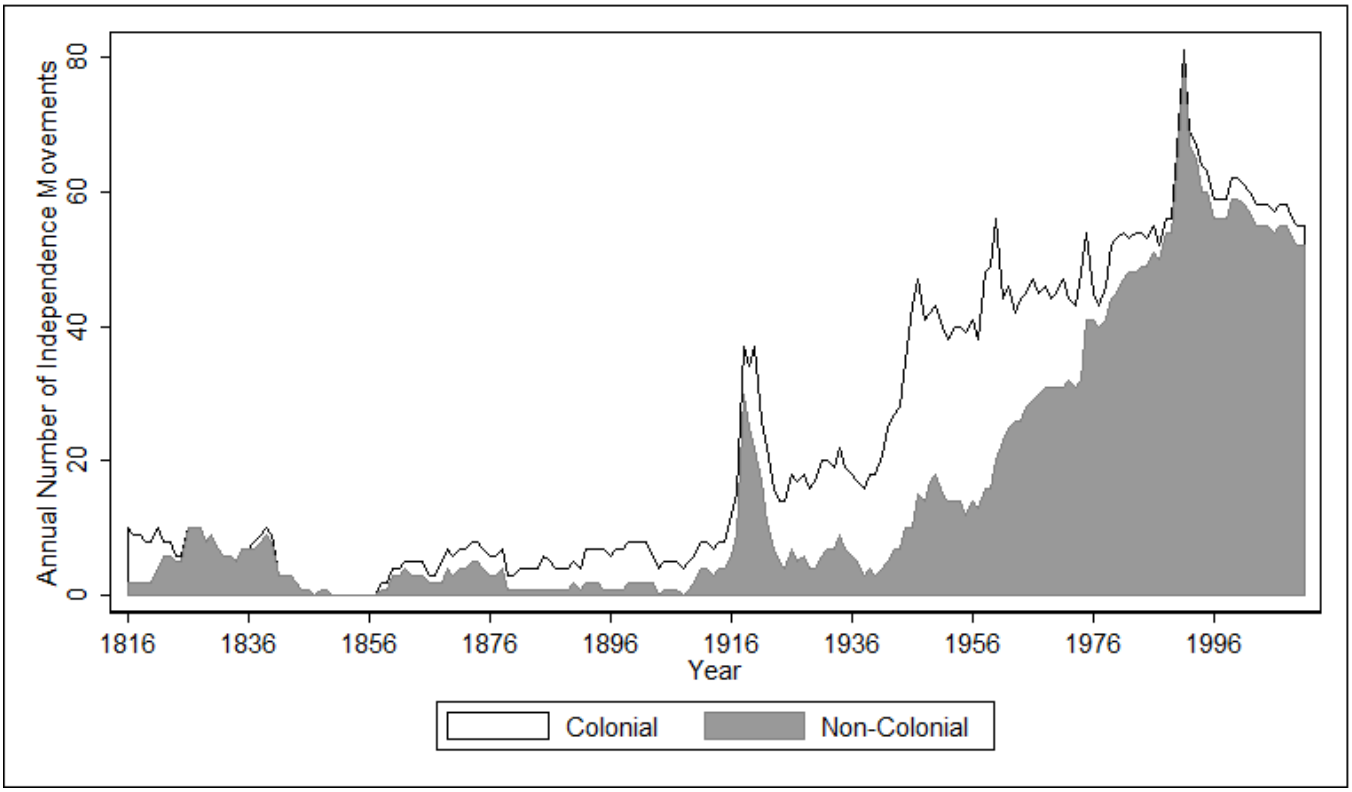
Figure 1: Annual number of states in the world[2]



Change occurred after 1945 when a combination of security, ideological, and economic factors began to reduce the competitive pressures for states to seize and hold territory. Transformations in the technology of warfare and a gathering prohibition against conquest nearly eliminated the incidence of 'state death'.[3] Meanwhile, the development of the liberal global economy and related growth of regional trade organizations reduced the need to possess large economic units. In an era of increasing globalization, small states could survive by plugging into the global economy to secure capital and resources and leverage their comparative advantage. Collectively, these factors greatly reduced the pressures driving states to expand.

But just as expansionist pressures began to abate, states began to face increased fragmentary pressures from within, and this imbalance is a key feature of the post-1945 era. The consolidation of the norm of self-determination in the United Nations Charter has provided stateless nations with the vocabulary and legal apparatus to pursue greater control over their political fates. Indeed, it is one of the chief reasons for the dramatic growth in secessionist movements, defined as nations formally seeking sovereign independence. Figure 2 displays the annual number of independence movements between 1816 and 2011, broken up into colonial and non-colonial cases. Such movements were comparatively rare in the nineteenth century and, aside from the dramatic spike in secessionism after World War I, remained so until after 1945. On average, there have been 52 movements per year during the post-1945 period.

Figure 2: Annual number of independence movements[4]



This is where the international recognition regime rises in importance. With respect to territory, the challenge for states in the contemporary period is not how to expand, but how to hold together, or at least disassemble in a controlled manner. Since any new state is a subtraction from an existing state, and governments are often concerned that secessionism in one region will spill over to another, the international community has developed a set of rules and principles to manage secessionist pressures.

Two fundamental questions lie at the heart of the international recognition regime. First, which should take priority:

the right of states to maintain their territory, or the right of stateless nations to choose their political fate, even if that means violating the territorial integrity of the larger state? Second, what are the criteria for determining which stateless nations have the right to independence? Answering these questions is no easy task in an international environment that is politically decentralized and subject to the push and pull of power politics.[5] The result has been a somewhat fluid and evolving set of norms and rules, a work in progress: the international recognition regime.

The preceding questions have been answered in several ways over the last 70 years. The first and least problematic path to independence is via state consent, in which the larger state removes its home state veto and recognizes the breakaway region. The second and most transformative path was decolonization, a process that was limited to the top-level administrative units of saltwater empires, regardless of the arbitrary manner in which they were typically created.[6] The third path was dissolution, a questionable term used by the international community to create a legal bulkhead separating the independence of the Yugoslav and Soviet republics from other forms of secession.[7] The fourth and only partly realized path stresses the remedial right of nations to independence when they are the victims of state-led atrocities – a controversial path, to be sure, and one that was hinted at in the partial recognition of Kosovo.

The strategies of secessionist movements constitute the third factor in these dynamics. Research shows that these groups are strategic and quite networked.[8] Secessionist leaders are typically well versed on the international recognition regime, and aware of the strategic interests of their own state. They often engage in quasi-diplomatic relations, tap diaspora networks, and engage in a range of institutional and/or extra-institutional methods to pursue their goal.

Secessionist movements display two general strategies that are mostly used in tandem. The first is to target their central government, as the Scots have done, and bargain for increased rights, autonomy, and, ideally, the formal right to decide their fate (usually via a referendum). The second strategy, the end run, is to bring the international community into the match and get it to either apply pressure on the central government, as the South Sudanese did, or else bypass it completely and recognize the aspiring nation, as the Kosovars did. Both strategies combine elements of coercion and normative appeal.

However, the choice of these strategies is partly conditioned by local technological, institutional, and historical factors. In broad terms, two roads to independence can be marked out. The high road is the form of secessionism that occurs in mature democracies. It is well institutionalized and, as recent events in Scotland and Catalonia show, it is built upon deep grass roots, support of durable political parties, and modern societies who can deploy an array of technological and communication tools to advance their cause. The low road to independence is the form of secessionism where violence is common. Such movements typically occur in less developed and/or less democratic regions, like in Chechnya, Bougainville, or the peripheral regions of Myanmar. They are usually elite-driven and are more common than their highly democratized counterparts.

One of the hard questions related to contemporary secession is whether it pays to employ violence.[9] The high road to independence has a poor track record despite (or perhaps in spite of) the absence of armed conflict. The Catalan secessionists have been blocked by the refusal of the Spanish government to negotiate, and are therefore forced to aim for small symbolic gains, contemplate illegal disobedience, and hope that the Spanish electorate will become more sympathetic. One wonders, rather cynically, if the Catalans would fare better if the possibility of violence were taken seriously. The international recognition regime may create perverse incentives.

A related question asks how far states and the international community can go when democratizing the process of secession. To honor a nation's demand for self-determination, as the United Kingdom did with Scotland, can actually solidify secessionism and institutionalize it even further. The Scottish National Party lost the 2014 referendum but may well win the next one, especially now that Brexit has altered the debate. But to deny a nation the right to decide can make for bad public relations, provide fuel for the secessionist cause, and increase the possibility of violence.

We thus return to two fundamental issues in the dynamics of secession: under what conditions does self-determination subordinate the right of states to maintain their territory, and who counts as a nation that deserves that

right? There are no clear answers to these questions and no final authority to decide them. Instead, they will be resolved in an ongoing manner by states, the international recognition regime, and the strategic maneuverings of secessionist movements.

Notes and References

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[3] Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: the Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

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[5] Mikulas Fabry, *Recognizing States: International Society and the Establishment of New States Since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Bridget Coggins, *Power Politics and State Formation in the Twentieth Century: The Dynamics of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[6] Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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[8] Tanisha M. Fazal, and Ryan D. Griffiths, "Membership Has Its Privileges: The Changing Benefits of Statehood," *International Studies Review* 16, no. 1 (2014): 79-106.

[9] Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

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