Explaining Secession

David S. Siroky

Simultaneously destroying and creating order, secession is a watershed event marked by significant political change: the rise and fall of regional and global powers, new patterns of international and domestic alliances, and sudden opportunities for states and groups to improve or defend their relative positions. Secession stands solidly at the intersection of domestic and international politics. It is therefore hardly surprising that secession is a subject of interdisciplinary interest, and has been analyzed from the perspectives of political science, economics, sociology, philosophy, and law. Finally, secession is not simply of academic interest, but concerns policymakers and governments around the globe which must cope with it on a frustratingly frequent basis.

At one level, the problem of secession is philosophical—do groups have a right to self-determination that trumps states’ rights to territory integrity, and if so under which conditions? At another level, it is an empirical question—why do ethnic groups attempt to secede in some places and not in others, at some times and not at others? Why do some secessions turn violent? Why do some secessions succeed in establishing states, while others fail, and still others settle into de facto sovereignty through territorial control? Why do some post-secessionist states establish the conditions for peace, while others only exacerbate ethnic tensions, and engender further violence? What role does state policy—whether it takes the form of repression or accommodation—play in propelling and subduing secession? What roles do external actors play—and why do some try to prevent ethnic violence while others do nothing, or even actively encourage it? In short, how do we explain secession?

When it occurs, secession is a practical, humanitarian issue, for it often entails considerable violence, destruction and tragedy. Violent secessionist conflicts account for the deaths of tens of millions, not to mention the brutal mistreatment

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of many more people (Isaacs 1975: 3; Horowitz 1985: xi; Gurr 2000; Brancati 2006). These conflicts are also widespread. According to one estimate, no more than 25 member states of the 196 member United Nations can claim to be free of such conflicts (Zarkovic-Bookman 1992: 7). The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data indicate that only five of the 23 major armed conflicts were non-ethnic in 1994, and only two of 26 in 1998 (Hechter 2000a, 2000b). Even these two exceptions—Ethiopia/Eritrea and India/Pakistan—were the direct result of earlier secessions. According to Fearon and Laitin’s 2003 data, about half of the civil wars since the end of the Cold War have been driven by rebels aiming for secession or autonomy. Sambanis (2001) shows that roughly 70 percent of civil wars since 1945 have been ethno-nationalist wars. Whichever period or metric we choose, it is clear that a sizable portion of armed conflicts are related to secession.

The tremors from the disintegration of three federal republics—the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia—contributed to renewed interest in this profoundly political problem. All told, the last two centuries have seen the emergence of at least five to six dozen de facto and de jure independent secessionist states in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, and Oceania, dozens more secessionist movements that failed and disappeared, and still more that remain engaged in efforts to break away from their host states (see Part II and Part VI).

Historically, even if only a small portion of declarations of secession or independence have come to fruition, their incidence is not diminishing over time (Armitage 2007). Indeed, since World War Two, the creation of new states through secession, including decolonization, has been on the rise (Fazal and Griffiths 2008).

The threat of secession is not only a problem for developing countries (e.g., Georgia, Moldova, Nigeria, Russia, and Indonesia), but also for developed countries (e.g., Belgium, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) (see Part VI). The fact that secession is at the core of political conflict in dozens of countries, afflicting both the developing and the developed world, provides solid ground for comparative analysis and theoretical synthesis. The events of the day also present the need for such an analysis. Although secession has long been a staple of the interstate system, only recently have social scientific efforts arisen to theorize and explain secessions in diverse places such as Abkhazia, East Timor, Eritrea, Kosovo, and Somaliland.

As with the study of any multidimensional phenomenon, the explanation of secession involves multiple issues, actors, and logics. Some of the core questions include:

1. Why do secessionist movements emerge among some groups, but not others?
2. What explains the timing of secession—why do ethnic groups pursue secession at certain times, but not others?
3. Why are some secessionist movements able to command extensive public support, while others only receive marginal support?
4. Why do some secessionist movements endure for many years, while others dissipate over time, ultimately disappearing altogether?
5. Why do some secessionist movements engage in violence against the government and other non-state actors, while others pursue non-violent strategies?

6. Why do some secessionist movements succeed in becoming independent states, while others fail, achieving only de facto independence or less?

7. Why do some host states pursue accommodation, while others opt for repression in responding to ethnic group claims?

8. What role do external actors, such as neighboring states, diasporas, international organizations, play in triggering secessionist violence, prolonging it, curbing it, and ending it?

9. Why do some states that emerged through secession establish peaceful internal and external relations, while others are almost immediately involved in intrastate and interstate conflicts?

10. What policy tools are available to governments, interested states and international organizations to tame secessionism?

Each question in this admittedly non-exhaustive list focuses on a distinct level of analysis and temporal phase within the political life-cycle of secession. A review of the relevant literature reveals that it can be fruitfully divided into three groups, according to the unit of analysis: the first set of studies focuses on the secessionist movement or ethnic group as the key actor; the second set concentrates on state behavior toward minorities; and the third set addresses the role of external actors or foreign powers. This tripartite structure provides a framework, or what Sartori (1970: 1039) called “data containers,” into which our theories and empirical observations can be fitted (see also Horowitz 1985: 16).

In this review, the levels are separated for analysis, with a final section considering the aftermath of secession. The section on ethnic groups organizes the literature according to main issues that drive grievances and facilitate collective action. This is followed by a discussion of state-centric approaches, which focuses on state capacity and state behavior towards ethno-nationalism within its borders. The third layer in the analysis is composed of international approaches to explaining secession, which includes a discussion of the main causes and consequences of external involvement in secession along with several conjectures. The final section is different, but represents an obvious and natural extension because it considers the crucial question of whether secession should be seen as a solution to ethnic conflict by analyzing secession’s aftermath.

It will be useful for the reader to keep in mind that explaining secession requires integrating this triadic structure at the core of the secession generating process.

Any coherent explanation for secession will need to account for the interactions, examining how groups and states bargain, fight, negotiate, and kill, along with how and why foreign powers—states, diasporas, international organizations—become involved, altering the domestic balance of power, and profoundly affecting the dynamics of secession.
1 Ethnic Groups

The most natural level on which to begin thinking theoretically about secession is the group level, where secessionist sentiments are born, and sometimes take root. Two questions have driven the literature: one, where do secessionist sentiments come from and, two, how do they become politically mobilized, morphing into separatist movements? (see also Chapter 11). Three broad answers to these questions can be delineated: (1) political grievances, (2) economic inequality, and (3) ethnic demography/geography (Hewitt 1977; Levine 1996). While these answers can be usefully separated for the purpose of analysis, equally important in understanding their causal effects is to theorize their interactions, including but not limited to substitution and reinforcement effects.

Political grievances are generally understood as barriers to entry or obstacles to social mobility, accompanied typically by some disproportionality between “deserved” and “achieved” political power, where “deserved” is usually defined relative to ethno-demographic features such as relative ethnic group size and spatial concentration but may also be interpreted historically. “Achieved” is often understood relative to some metric of political influence, such as the proportion of legislative and administrative positions occupied by co-ethnics. As Wimmer (2002: 5) demonstrates, “modern institutions of inclusion are systematically tied to ethnic and national forms of exclusion. Correspondingly, ethnic conflicts ... are integral parts of the modern order of nation-states.”

However, sometimes political grievances are placated by a group’s advantage or preponderance in other less political spheres, particularly in the economic realm, recognizing that there is often a division of labor among ethnic groups (Horowitz 2000: 108–35). Other times, political and economic power go hand in hand, reinforcing minority political exclusion with economic inequality (Breton 1964).

Once introduced, inequalities can be fortified through discriminatory legislation and language policy, which translates directly into educational disparities that reproduce political and economic inequality. Not surprisingly, this dynamic bodes poorly in the long run for the “out-group” and it begets resentment over perceived status inequalities, which bodes poorly in the long run for the “in-group” (Petersen 2002). In the Soviet context, this dynamic created demands from some regional minorities within union republics for an elevation of their status to autonomous provinces and republics, since autonomy implies power, prestige, and opportunities that are perceived as having been denied (Roeder 1991; Treisman 1997; Cornell 2002; Giuliano 2006).

Similar grievances can be identified in the economic realm, but with important differences. General inequality between groups in economic attainment, cost sharing, and redistribution benefits, arguably possess a curvilinear relationship with the disposition to secede. On the one hand, many theorists posit that relative economic deprivation increases the likelihood of secession, because opportunity costs are low when poverty is high, as in Bangladesh, Southern Sudan, and the case of Muslims in Thailand (e.g., Horowitz 2000). But others argue that impoverished groups stand the most to gain from remaining inside the state and the most...
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1 lose by exiting. Relatively wealthier groups also possess formidable grounds for
2 complaint, because they often subsidize the less prosperous groups and therefore
3 bear a disproportionate share of the economic cost of maintaining the state, as in
4 Northern Italy, Slovenia, or Tatarstan (e.g., Hale 2008). This has led some to believe
5 that both extremely impoverished and overly wealthy groups are most likely to
6 secede, whereas those groups at relative parity with the average national income
7 are the least likely to pursue secession (Stewart 2009; Cederman, Gleditsch, and
8 Weidmann 2010).
9 Ethnicity and economics were already central in Horowitz (1985), who conceived
10 of secession as a mix of economic calculation and fear. Analyzing secessionist
11 movements in newly independent states in Africa and Asia, Horowitz focuses on
12 the economic disparity between the secessionist group and the central government
13 to explain the timing of secession, but recognizes and incorporates the role played
14 by fears of political exclusion and cultural extinction, which he couches in terms of
15 anxiety about relative worth. He writes: “separatism results from varying mixes of
16 sheer economic interest and group apprehension” (Horowitz 1985: 259). Horowitz’s
17 theory conceives of groups and regions as either backward or advanced, relative
18 to the mean levels of prosperity in the country as a whole. This produces four
19 ideal types: backward groups in backward regions, advanced groups in backward
20 regions, advanced groups in advanced regions, and backward groups in advanced
21 regions. Each type follows a distinct causal logic that can be deduced from relative
22 regional and group position (Horowitz 1985: 233ff). The relative weight attached
23 to ethnic anxiety and economic calculation varies by group: backward groups in
24 backward regions tend to give more weight to ethnic anxiety and less to economic
25 costs and benefits, and it is precisely this type that is most likely to secede and
26 to do so earliest after independence. The advanced groups in advanced regions
27 are least likely to secede. When they do, secession is likely to be later rather than
28 earlier. Since Horowitz also believes that there is likely to be less infighting (and
29 more subgroup amalgamation) among advanced groups, secessionist movements
30 among advanced groups are also likely to be more cohesive.
31 These background conditions, and many others that we could enumerate,
32 require triggers to set secession in motion—to make it appear attractive relative to
33 less extreme alternatives. The alternatives need to be credible, and often enough
34 the potential secessionists see signals that they are not. Such signals can come in
35 the form of unilateral actions from the central government, including legal changes
36 that affect the region or group adversely, or culturally-oriented prohibitions on
37 the legality of dress, language, and ritual. They may also emerge from signs that
38 the central government is unstable, and may not even exist long enough to follow
39 through on its promises. Ethnic riots, unpunished looting, and armed groups
40 not under the government’s control serve to indicate the government’s inability
41 to provide security to the region, and to suggest that alternatives to secession,
42 which entail remaining in the state, are not truly viable (cf., Pavković with Radan
44 Economic grievances between ethnic groups are pervasive, but when class is
45 coterminous with ethnicity, the impetus to secede is more powerful, since there
46
are fewer cross-cutting cleavages to undermine the impulse to exit and less fragmentation within groups to divide a secessionist movement. When ethno-economic discrimination is coterminous with minority status solutions such as positive discrimination for minorities, which implies negative discrimination for the majority, are often proposed. Although these can minimize ethnic minority alienation, they can also exhaust majority tolerance, making the competition for resources between ethnic groups into a salient political issue. Such anti-discrimination measures may lead to the perception of disadvantage among the majority population, and even to status reversal in some sectors, augmenting animosity towards the “privileged” minority.

Economic wealth can of course come from greater productivity, but it may also result from exploiting the presence of raw materials, especially oil reserves and oil pipelines, as in Katanga, Bougainville, Chechnya, and Biafra. Mineral resources, as in northern Kosovo, Tatarstan, and Siberia, serve a similar function (see also Chapter 10). Grievances can result for both reasons, which boil down to a claim that the group is receiving less than “its fair share.” This line of reasoning bears some similarity to work by scholars who believe internal rebellions, of which secession is one type, are driven by greedy motives. This literature implies that secession is likely driven by “atypical (economic) opportunities for building a rebel organization” (King 2001; Collier and Hoeffler 2004). These atypical opportunities include controlling, looting, and exploiting valuable resources, especially primary commodities (diamonds, timber, cocaine, minerals).

Some scholars have sought to apply this framework to explain the duration and persistence of separatist conflicts long after the major violence has ended in an effort to understanding the material benefits of ethnic wars (King 2001). King explains the duration of secessionist conflicts by focusing on the benefits that all sides reap from its duration. Since separatists become state-builders, “ending the conflict” is less about conflict resolution, he argues, and more about reintegration of “two functionally distinct administrations, militaries, and societies.” Resolving secessionist conflict in these cases involves the unification of two states, one de jure and the other de facto (Coggins 2006).

Few actors possess an incentive to end the conflict. The rebel government and the official government exploit the territory’s ambiguous legal status for economic gain, mainly through smuggling, laundering, and tax evasion. Eliminating this ambiguity would necessarily entail an economic loss for several key stake holders, whereas prolonging the status quo facilitates resource extraction, tax evasion, and enduring economic benefits, hence its duration.

In addition to such political and economic motives, ethnic demography and geography figure prominently into the decision to secede, since ethnic mobilization and collective action demand both the desire and the capacity, the willingness and the opportunity, to act. As a result, many theorists would agree that, when it comes to secession, “size matters” (Leff 1971; DeNardo 1985; Tarrow and Tilly 2006; cf. Horowitz 1972; Hechter and Okamoto 2001). One reason is that numbers are themselves arguments, buttressing group claims and counter-claims to power, status, and prestige (Siroky 2009). Though commonly treated as static, numbers can
have a past, present, and future. Majorities that have become minorities remember the golden era, however distant, and majorities that can foresee the impermanence of their numerical superiority, provided that birth and death rates are forecasted correctly, have reasons for preemptive action to avert status reversal.

Demographics can also become politically relevant by more deliberate and sudden means, for example, through government-sponsored migration policies and settlement schemes that encourage members of one ethnic group (usually the majority) to settle areas occupied by large numbers of another ethnic group (usually a minority). The goal of such policies is clear—to dilute the power of a population pocket that is believed to possess dubious loyalty to the state. This strategy, whether performed through settlement policies or ethnic gerrymandering, is also intended to undermine any future claim to the territory or its infiltration by a foreign power using locals as a fifth column. China’s efforts to dilute the populations in Tibet and Xinjiang fit this pattern, as do Georgia’s redistricting of Javakheti, an Armenian province, to include a neighboring Georgian-majority district, Samtskhe, and attempts to dilute the Russian population in Crimea by encouraging the settlement of more loyal Tatars.

Demographic dynamics of this sort, when mixed with policies that favor the newcomers over current residents, can trigger secession because inaction begets adverse material consequences for the minority’s employment, economic, and education opportunities. Besides the material consequences, which are significant, demographic changes have deleterious ideational effects, spreading fear, exacerbating security dilemmas, and ultimately radicalizing actors.

Wrapped in the garb of selective histories that include glorious battles lost, sacrifices made, and subsequent subordination, ethnic groups seek redemption. In its extreme form, this requires laying claim to a separate state; but lesser forms include obtaining credible commitments to increase ethno-regional power and prestige. Secessionist leaders and their separatist movements do not possess fixed demands, but rather adjust the extent of their demands on the central government along a spectrum from moderate demands such as cultural rights all the way to independence (Horowitz 1985: 13). As Jenne (2007) has shown, this fluctuation in the extent of ethnic group demands over time and between groups is a form of bargaining leverage, the true extent of which is determined by previous autonomy, territorial concentration and access to resources, both internal and external.

Demographic factors are important in more direct ways. Most scholars recognize, for instance, that a territorially concentrated minority is more likely than a spatially dispersed one to form a serious secessionist movement (Toft 2002, 2003; Collier and Hoeflter 2004). The mechanisms that have been suggested for the association between secession and spatial demography are sundry, and include the fact that concentration reinforces ethnic identity, facilitates collective action, minimizes internal opposition, and enables ethnic mobilization. The most appropriate means of measuring ethnic demography—in particular how to summarize it into a single index—remains the subject of considerable debate, however (Posner 2004; Siroky 2007; Chandra and Wilkinson 2008).
THE ASHGATE RESEARCH COMPANION TO SÉCESSION

The vast majority of large-N studies that would be relevant to this debate employ the same measure of ethnic diversity—ethno-linguistic fractionalization or ELF—originally calculated in 1960 by Soviet researchers for 129 countries by summing the squared shares of “ethno-linguistic groups.” According to a large body of theory on violent conflict, however, it is not ethnic “fractionalization” (a large number of small, splintered groups) that should be associated with conflict, but a small number of large, internally cohesive groups. There is a lot of evidence and theory suggesting that ELF is not the appropriate measure of the theoretical concept (Horowitz 1985; Esteban and Ray 1994, 2008; Collier 1998; Collier, Hoefler, and Soderbom 2001; Ellingsen 2000; Reynal-Querol 2002; Sambanis 2002; Sambanis and Doyle 2006; Alesina et al. 2003; Fearon 2003; Cederman and Girardin 2007; Siroky 2007; Chandra and Wilkinson 2008). Although discontent with ELF is high, alternatives are still few and far between.

One noteworthy exception is proposed in Reynal-Querol (2002), which offers a measure of ethnic polarization to capture how far a country diverges from the case of two equally sized groups (e.g., split 50/50). One important limitation, however, is that not all countries look like Cyprus, Estonia, and Belgium; many have more than two relevant groups. Theoretically and empirically, we also expect more conflict for three large groups (e.g., Iraq, Gambia, Benin, or Bosnia) or four (e.g., Nigeria, Bolivia, Kenya, or the United Arab Emirates). This may be one reason that it has not been widely used. Until there is more work on the measurement—and new measures that match particular theories are created—progress on this front is likely to be slow. Missing from this discussion of size, however, is space—or any indication of where the region/group is located. Whether it is inland or on the periphery can be crucial for the viability of a secessionist movement. Most secessionist movements, but not all, occur in peripheral regions. Cederman et al. (2009) have demonstrated empirically that separatist conflict is significantly more likely in regions near the state border and at a distance from the capital than revolutionary conflicts, which tend to occur closer to the capital.

At the most basic level, geographic proximity is thought to influence the behavior of the central government, its military, and the insurgents (Sprout and Sprout 1956; Jackson 1958; Diehl 1991; Gleditsch and Ward 2001). The use of geography in the limited sense of distance is more a proxy of logistical interaction opportunities than an attempt to model the impact of geography on actors’ behavior and strategies of conflict. Beyond distance, the most natural feature to think of in the context of secession is terrain. Terrain may influence strategy, and could affect the decision to continue fighting for secession rather than to negotiate, and therefore influences the duration of the secessionist conflict.

For example, Fearon and Laitin (2003) have argued that, since insurgencies thrive in weakly accessible areas such as dense forests or mountainous terrain, where offense advantages are minimized and defensive tactics have an edge, countries with these features are more likely to experience insurgent, often secessionist, civil wars (see also Fearon 2004a). Collier and Hoefler (2004, 2009) find only marginal support for the mountainous component and no support for the forest component of the hypothesis. Current cross-sectional efforts to test this idea using...
the percentage of the country covered by mountain or dummy variables represent
only crude approximations. Few studies, however, take full advantage of GIS and,
as a result, geographic analysis tends to consider only very rough geographic
measures of borders, proximity, and terrain. Efforts using GIS generated data will
help to bridge the currently large gap between measurement and theory, here as
in other areas, and will emphasize important interactions, such as those between
geography, ethnicity, and conflict (Cederman, Buhaug, and Ketil Rod 2009).
In particular, more precise geo-coded data will enable us to examine theoretical
propositions at their appropriate level. Often, the appropriate level of measurement
is not the country per se, but the limited area in which the conflict occurs. Thus,
slippage between measurement and theory is potentially considerable. For
example, if mountains are hypothesized to influence the duration of secessionist
and insurgent conflict, then it would make good sense to measure the terrain in
the region of potential conflict rather than as a percentage of the entire country’s
territory for the simple reason that there is no obvious correspondence between the
regional topography and the country’s average topography.
The same goes for many other variables—including ethnic heterogeneity,
geography, and inequality, which should be understood at the local level for
regionally-based secessionist conflicts rather than solely at the national level.
Sambanis and Milanović (2004) offer an insightful analysis using regional inequality
data. But local data on ethnic heterogeneity are hard to come by for a large sample
of states. Even such data at the national level are far from abundant and are often
problematic (Siroky 2007). Despite data limitations, demographic and geographic
features of the conflict deserve closer theoretical scrutiny and closer measurement
than has been standard practice to date. It seems fair to presume that many
characteristics of conflict zones are not necessarily well represented by features
of the country as a whole. At the same time, characteristics of the region relative
to the features of the country as a whole are most relevant to understanding some
of the sources of secessionist conflict, especially economic and political grievances
(Stewart 2009; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Weidmann 2010). Buhaug et al. (2009)
have taken up this task in relation to the relative economic prosperity of regions,
and have shown that, for civil wars, absolute poverty increases the probability
of conflict in specific areas, but that relative wealth increases the probability of
conflict only in poor states. An improved effort in this domain will also have
payoffs for related questions, such as the causes and consequences of the spread,
diffusion, and escalation of secessionist conflict within and across borders (see
also Chapter 12).
This is why speaking of ethnic demography requires a parallel discussion of
ethnic geography. Territorially dispersed ethnic groups, of whatever size, are less
likely to engage in secessionist activity, because collective action is more difficult to
achieve, ethnic ties are generally weaker, and internal opposition from other ethnic
groups is likely to be greater. Ethnic groups that fit this pattern tend to pursue
policies that redress the discrimination they face within the context of the existing
state, seeking voice rather than exit (Hirschman 1970). Similarly, the discussion
of ethnic demography and ethnic geography also must deal with the issue of
1 ethnicity itself to show why it is ethnic groups, rather than some other collective
2 identity, that seek secession. Hale (2008) has offered a creative psychological
3 explanation for why ethnicity offers such a powerful strategy for mobilization, by
4 separating ethnicity, which is viewed as an uncertainty-reduction technique and
5 not necessarily a motive for behavior, from ethnic politics, which is about interests.
6 This theoretical move places ethnicity on firmer ground, provides leverage in
7 explaining why ethnicity is sometimes, but far from consistently, associated with
8 conflict, and shows how ethnicity can resolve collective action problems faced by
9 potential secessionist movements.
10 All of these explanations—political, economic, demographic, and geographic—
11 focus on the ethnic group/region as the unit of analysis. They assume that the
12 ethnic group is a more or less unitary actor, an assumption that should be relaxed
13 to analyze particular settings (Kitschelt 1989; Stedman 1997; Gorenburg 2000;
14 Cunningham 2006; Kalyvas 2008; Bueno de Mesquita 2008; Christia 2008; Pearlman
15 2008; Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2010; Lawrence 2010; Staniland 2010) (see
16 also Chapter 11). A direction for future research, then, involves examining how
17 micro-level and intra-ethnic differences influence macro-level behavior, such as
18 foreign policy. For example, how does the salience of differences between Ghug
19 and Tosk Albanians influence the likelihood of a pan-Albanian movement aimed at
20 uniting Albanian-inhabited lands in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Greece
21 with Albania proper? Second, future research should exploit more vigorously the
22 increasing precision of information available through GIS and geo-coded data of
23 ethnic groups and conflicts. Third, ethnic group-level explanations often fail to take
24 the state sufficiently seriously, ignoring the state’s characteristics, behavior, and
25 strategy. The next section redresses this omission by focusing squarely on the state.

The State

Despite the centrality of the state, a good portion of the literature depicts secession
in a seemingly stateless political space. Ironically, one way in which the state has
been brought into the analysis is through its absence in studies of state weakness,
state failure, and state capacity. In the case of state failure, the state cannot prevent
secessionist sentiments from escalating into sustained movements—it is not what
the state does, but what it does not do that matters. Fearon and Laitin (2003), among
others, provide empirical evidence that poorer states are more prone to all forms
of civil war, including separatist civil war, than are their wealthier counterparts
(cf. Young 2009; Hechter, Quinn, and Wibbels 2004; Siroky 2007) (see Chapter 12).
Theoretically, this correlation is sometimes interpreted as the effect of low state
capacity—since weak states are unable to deter insurgencies, civil wars are more
likely to erupt.

These indicators of state capacity—GDP per capita, mountainous terrain, oil
revenue dependence—are all believed to make insurgency easier. We can theorize
another mechanism, however. Secessionists gain popular support and are sustained

by offering what weak states cannot—protection of property and provision of services—the basic elements of governance. Rebel rule, or guerilla governance as it is sometimes called, supplants the official government in some region of the country (Wickham-Crowley 1987, 1992; Kasfir n.d.). In winning the battle to protect and provide, rebel groups succeed in establishing states, albeit inside other states.

In some cases, rebels are merely leading the de facto (host) state, which itself was formed through secession. The prior secession provides a convenient example and an obvious language in which to voice minority grievances (Beran 1984; Pavković 2007; Siroky 2009). When the size of the political unit shrinks, intra-group distinctions can become more politically salient, and ethnic competition at lower levels generally increases. Relations within groups that were once tempered by competition between groups in a larger polity are subject to reevaluation. Once other groups are out of the picture, smaller differences can assume greater importance, making ethnic co-existence less attractive and secession more so.

We have many examples of this phenomenon in Europe and Eurasia. Bosniak leaders, for example, were motivated in good measure to pursue secession after Croatia and Slovenia broke away, which left them in a smaller political unit in which the relative size of Bosniaks to other ethnic groups was much larger. Similarly, after Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina seceded from Yugoslavia, everything changed for Serb minorities in these new states, arguably for the worse, prompting recursive secessionist conflict to surface in Krajina and Republika Srpska (see Chapters 8 and 12 and Part VI). Georgia’s secession from the Soviet Union, too, was soon followed by recursive secessionist violence in Abhkazia and South Ossetia. When Moldova broke away from the Soviet Union, Transdniestria claimed a right to remain part of the Soviet Union, ultimately producing a de facto independent statelet, sponsored by Russia, on the West Bank of the river Dnistr (see Part VI).

Likewise in Africa, once Somaliland broke away from Somalia, Puntland attempted to secede from Somaliland, leading yet another territory, Maakhir state, to proclaim independence in response to overlapping claims from Puntland and Somaliland (see Part VI). When Katanga declared its intent to leave Zaire, the Baluba in North Katanga saw that life was about to take a turn for the worse, and decided to get out while their window of opportunity remained open. And in South Asia, once Bangladesh left Pakistan, a Sindhi movement emerged for autonomy from both Punjabi and Muhajir dominance. Zulfi Bhutto’s government then aided the Sindh in the 1970s, which facilitated Muhajir mobilization against Sindhi dominance. In short, when minorities exist in the new state, as they almost always do, reciprocal separatism can emerge even where such sentiments did not previously exist or were only latent. One scholar explains this phenomenon matter-of-factly: “one group’s independence is another’s servitude” (Horowitz 1985: 278).

The state is sometimes directly responsible for ethnic minority mobilization, as when the state initiates or prevents violence for political purposes (e.g., Wilkinson 2004). According to a domestic version of diversionary war theory, for example, governments militarily target disliked (and preferably defenseless) ethnic groups at home, blaming them for domestic shortcomings, creating an in-group, out-group distinction, and scapegoating to elicit public support (Coser 1956; Glaser
1958; Gagnon 1995; Tir and Jasinski 2008). Domestic diversion, it is argued, has many of the same benefits as international diversionary war, and some that it does not have, such as ethnic outbidding, but has far fewer costs and consequences (DeVotta 2005; Filippov 2009). It also has the benefit of being a strategy that is broadly available to most leaders, since most possess multiple ethnic groups, at least some of which offer low-cost opportunities for domestic diversionary conflict (Snyder and Ballentine 1996; Tir and Jasinski 2008).

State repression, more generally, can include non-violent policy, such as changing laws that adversely affect minorities, forbidding minority political parties, removing forms of positive discrimination that were in place, or it can be more aggressive, and involve jailing charismatic leaders, confiscating property, assassinating leaders (Davenport 1995; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999; Moore 2000; Mylonas 2008). The risk associated with this form of repression is that it can backfire, causing latent, divided, and unorganized groups to mobilize, thus escalating tensions which were previously mild (Lichbach 1987). To avoid backlash, some have suggested that leaders seek defenseless (but despised) ethnic groups to achieve the effect without the attendant risk of escalation. Defenseless groups also tend to lack ethnic kin states that could intervene or support their brethren if threatened, but even groups with kin states may be targeted, provided that the kin states remain relatively uninterested in coming to their aid. The psychology of aggression literature, however, fairly thoroughly refutes the assumption that defenseless groups are more likely to be victimized by the states in which they reside than are strong groups (Horowitz 2001: 135–50) (see Chapter 12).

This relates to the more general question of whether repression works. Gurr, Tilly, and others sometimes identified with theories of “relative deprivation” tend to focus on state repression as the critical force driving group mobilization, so the answer is clearly no from the state’s viewpoint (Gurr 1970; Tilly 1978; Eckstein 1965: 154; Lichbach 1987: 269). However, “resource mobilization” theorists argue that repression deters group mobilization by increasing the costs of organizing and decreasing the leader’s capacity to do so (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Although it may exacerbate grievances, repression makes group violence against the state less likely. Lichbach attempts to resolve this “paradox” by suggesting that there is a key omitted variable—the consistency of the government’s policy. Both consistent accommodation and consistent repression work to reduce violent ethnic group activity, whereas inconsistent policies generally increase ethnic group activity (Lichbach 1987).

The question of repression’s effectiveness is also central to the closely related literature on the effectiveness of indiscriminate violence in counterinsurgencies. Downes (2007, 2008) questions the conventional wisdom that violence against noncombatants must be selective or risk alienating the population, and explores the conditions under which such violence can be effective. Downes finds that repression and indiscriminate violence are more effective when the geographic area and the size of the underlying population supporting the insurgents are smaller. Rather than alienating the local population, Downes argues, repression and indiscriminate force are sometimes needed to prevent the local population from
supporting the separatists and insurgents. Downes and Cochrane (2010) present tentative evidence that repression and civilian victimization may help states win wars, especially against smaller targets, but also raise some important concerns about endogeneity and selection effects.

Lyall (2009) also questions the notion that indiscriminate violence and repression is necessarily counter-productive in terms of inciting insurgent attacks. Across matched pairs of similar shelled and non-shelled villages, Lyall shows that the shelled ones experienced a 24 percent reduction in post-treatment mean insurgent attacks relative to control villages. Lyall (2010) builds on this result and presents compelling evidence that ethnicity is also critical to understanding whether repression works to reduce violence in civil wars through its effect on the information available to co-ethnic pro-state counter-insurgents. Using evidence from the Second Chechen war, Lyall demonstrates that co-ethnics make more effective counterinsurgents, reducing subsequent insurgent attacks by about 40 percent after pro-Russian Chechen sweeps relative to similar Russian-only operations. Intra-ethnic networks and prior experience as an insurgent serve to reduce subsequent insurgent attacks by providing better information, which allows counterinsurgents to correctly identify the insurgents within the population, to issue more credible threats against civilians for noncooperation and to convert, if necessary, to kill any fighters and their supporters.

The discussion of state behavior toward secessionists would be incomplete if it focused solely on repression and violence, and failed to consider the possibility of accommodation and the most common institutional solutions. There is a lively debate about which institutions work, what incentives they engender, and what effect they have on the propensity to mobilize and seek secession. Federal institutions, and decentralization more generally, are sometimes thought to be slippery slopes leading to secession (Roeder 1991; Bunce 1999; Cornell 2002). Others contend, however, that such institutions actually satisfy, rather than whet, separatist appetites (Diamond 1999; Stepans 1999; Bermeo 2002; Bermeo and Amoretti 2003). Scholars have made headway in unpacking this “paradox,” and analyzing the conditions under which decentralization has one effect rather than the other, and the tradeoffs that stem from choosing between repressive and responsive policies (Hechter 2000a; Kohli 1997; Lustick, Miodownik, and Eidelson 2004; Bakke and Wiibbels 2006; Brancati 2006, 2008).

Hechter (2000a: 10), for example, offers the following reconciliation of the two arguments in the literature, specifically with respect to federalism as one responsive policy with ambiguous effects: “Whereas decentralization may provide cultural minorities with greater resources to engage in collective action … at the same time, it may also erode the demand for sovereignty.” Kohli (1997) makes a related argument about accommodation from a strong state increasing instability in the short term, but decreasing it in the long term.

Lustick, Miodownik, and Eidelson (2004) provide an agent-based model of secession to explore these possibilities and find support for the views of Hechter and Kohli: “increasing representativeness,” they write, “in fact decreased secessionist activity … representative institutions, even if not fully autonomous,
thus seem to inhibit secessionism.” At the same time, the authors argue that rigorous repression can prevent mobilization, but only in the short term, “at great cost and without eliminating the threat of secessionism” (Lustick, Miodownik, and Eidelson 2004: 223). Power-sharing, they claim, can be more effective in the long term, yet it also tends to encourage larger minority “identitarian movements” and faces risks from spoilers (Stedman 1997; Sisk 2003). Northern Ireland, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea are often cited as power-sharing successes because they reduced the risk of spoilers by integrating and including them in decision-making (Horowitz 1985; Reilly 2001). Nigeria, Lebanon, and Cyprus, by contrast, are reminders that even carefully designed power-sharing institutions are far from a panacea, and can sometimes exacerbate problems in divided societies (Seaver 2000).

Bakke and Wibbels (2006) propose a different reconciliation of federalism’s heterogeneous effects, contending that its ability to mitigate political and secessionist violence is contingent upon regional inequality and ethnic diversity. Specifically, they argue that fiscal decentralization increases the likelihood of ethnic rebellion when there are wide disparities in income across region. In addition, they find that when a strong national party excludes ethnic regions from national governance, ethnic conflict is more likely. Essentially, Bakke and Wibbels show that the effect of federalism is contingent on underlying societal features, especially ethnic group concentration and regional economic inequality.

Institutional arguments, such as those associated with federalism, also raise a number of important questions, including (1) why, despite decades of federal arrangements, secession happens at certain junctures, but not at others and (2) why secession occurs in the absence of federal arrangements, or how it helps to explain why secession happened in pre-federal times, say from the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, where none possessed federal institutions and very few possessed any form of autonomy. In the post-Soviet context, it raises three key questions: (1) how to explain cases with autonomous status that did not experience violent conflict, (2) why cases with marginal levels of autonomy engaged in violent conflict before cases with actual autonomy, and (3) how to incorporate endogenous institutions, or the origins of autonomous arrangements, which often followed, rather than preceded, violent conflict (Saparov 2010).

These challenges aside, this literature pushes us to think harder about the heterogeneous effects of state policy on mobilization and separatism by specifying non-linear and dynamic relationships between rebel groups (dissidents, insurgents, and separatists) and the state (the central government, its armed forces) (Lichbach 1987; Rasler 1996; Gartner and Regan 1996). One conclusion that emerges clearly is that secessionists act and react to the state’s actions, both present and past, and not only to the state’s inaction and weakness. We therefore need to better understand the endogenous sources of variation in state minority policies and the conditions under which states pursue assimilation, inclusion, repression, cleansing, and killing (Mylonas 2008). Whether policy tends toward inclusion, the status quo, or exclusion is likely to sway minority leaders’ calculus closer or farther from secession versus a less radical strategy (Bunce 2005). The state, its past and likely future behavior,
must therefore be brought back into the analysis of secession to understand why
and when some ethnic groups secede (see Chapters 11 and 12).

Walter (2006a) has done this in a framework that focuses on the government’s
past behavior toward ethnic groups and its likely future behavior. In particular,
she shows that ethnic groups are considerably more likely to mobilize for self-
determination, all else equal, when the government is unlikely to face additional
ethnic challengers in the future and when it has a history of concessions to earlier
ethnic separatist demands. Walter argues that understanding ethnic secession
involves examining the past and future interactions between the state and its ethnic
groups—in short, analyzing retrospective and prospective calculations—rather
than merely focusing on the immediate structural conditions such as the state’s
capacity or topography. Incorporating this information into the analysis represents
an advance on purely structural accounts, and adds a much needed dose of strategy
and dynamism to explanations of separatist activism.

Walter (2006b) builds on this logic to explain why governments fight some
separatists but not others. Drawing on a reputational mechanism, Walter shows that
governments are less likely to pursue responsive policies and more likely to engage
in repressive ones when the state faces multiple future ethnic challengers. She also
shows that repression appears to work in the sense that governments which failed
to accommodate one ethnic challenger were less likely to confront additional ones
in the future, thus offering a causal link between the future and present behavior of
strategic actors (see also Walter 2009; and, for a skeptical view, Evangelista 2002).
Barkus (1999) explains this aspect of state behavior using a materialist logic and
focusing on the strength of the disputants and the resources involved. Griffiths and
Fazal (2008) focus on institutions, and argue that democracies are more likely to let
secessionists leave peacefully, but that the administrative organization of the state
determines who they can release without fear of setting a precedent, and who they
must fight to maintain their reputation. Butt (2011) brings in an international angle,
and argues that the government’s response depends on its perception of whether
the new state is likely to be a rival in the future, which is contingent on regional
security dynamics.

This state-oriented secession literature usefully focuses our attention on how
rebel ethnic groups and their host states interact strategically. Just as studies
of secession focusing solely on ethnic group grievances, economic inequality,
demographic and geographic factors will miss the crucial role of the state, so
studies of state repression and accommodation must simultaneously account for
the behavioral foundations of the ethnic group behavior (see Goodwin 2001, for a
thorough treatment of state-centric approaches to revolutions). Incorporating the
strategic interaction of states and groups enhances our ability to explain secession,
but more must be done to capture the dynamics of secession. Hechter (1992), for
example, advances a model of secession in this spirit in which four processes—
some focused on the host state’s decision, and others focused on the collective
action problem faced by the population of the territorial sub-unit—work together
to make secession unlikely among most regions.
Up to this point, the analysis at the group and the state level has bracketed out everything going on outside the state. If secession is a political phenomenon distinguished in part by being situated at the intersection of domestic and international politics, then a theoretical account of secession must also address the international dimensions of ethnic secessions, and the critical role played by foreign powers in escalating and suppressing secession.

(Some Conjectures about) Foreign Powers

Even though secessions occur within states, which is where most of the literature has focused its attention, they cannot be understood fully without accounting for the actions and actors outside the state (see Chapters 13 and 14). Bracketing the international context and international actors from the analysis does not merely provide an “incomplete” picture. It is inferentially problematic in the sense that important aspects of secession elude explanation, including the onset, duration, and termination of secessionist conflict (see Chapter 12). A purely domestic story also risks falsely attributing to domestic politics what is driven by international affairs and world politics.

The existing literature at this level of analysis has focused on explaining the fundamental causes and consequences of external involvement. Indeed, external support for secessionists is one of the primary ways in which external actors influence the dynamics of secession and make it more likely to erupt into violence (Heraclides 1990; Jenne 2007; Saideman and Ayres 2008). External support can run the gamut from diplomatic and rhetorical support, to border lenience, or providing sanctuary for fighters, to explicit material support, which can include financial support, arms sales, military training, and even direct military involvement. How much support ensues will influence minority group–state bargaining dynamics, including whether secession even emerges as a serious possibility (see Chapter 14).

It is therefore not especially surprising that the actions of foreign powers have a direct bearing on the success of separatism. As the constitutive theory of statehood has long recognized, recognition by foreign powers is the sine qua non of secessionists’ efforts to become new states (Crawford 2005) (see Chapter 13).

Even when secessionist movements do not gain wider recognition, as in Northern Cyprus or Abkhazia, a minimum requirement for their success and sustenance seems to be that at least one state is willing to offer its support. Cetinyan (2002) shows that such external support, if and when it exists, can cast a long shadow over the domestic actors; some forms of support, Kuperman (2008) and Grigoryan (2010) argue, may even create moral hazards for insurgent groups, and increase the likelihood of escalation.

Drawing attention to the importance of international actors raises important and difficult questions that do not fit neatly into the group–state framework, including how to capture the heterogeneous effects of external actors on secession and how to explain third-party involvement in the first place. Introducing a third player alters
the balance of power between the central government and the minority group and influences whether the group will remain silent, revolt and be crushed, receive some form of autonomy, or seek to exit the state altogether. As a result, bringing in a third player enables us to explain why, among diverse states with very similar endowments (i.e., structural conditions, ethnic composition, state capacity), some escalate into secessionist violence, while others do not. Since external involvement is highly variable and volatile, not only across cases but within them over time, it provides some leverage in explaining variation within cases over time, which is something that static and structural factors are not well equipped to do (see Chapter 13).

To the extent that the presence of third parties shifts the balance of relative power toward one party and away from the other, any model that ignores this shift will inaccurately evaluate the game being played and will misjudge the outcome. Unlike individual or elite theories that are also dynamic, however, external support directly affects relative power, and therefore enables scholars to explain why some groups (possessing all or some of the above mentioned attributes) engage in secessionist violence, at certain times, and why these secessionist activities wax and wane over time.

Jenne (2004, 2007) shows that the inclusion of the external dimensions of secession can also potentially explain why the same group shifts its demands over time, sometimes advancing more moderate claims, such as language rights, and at other times making more radical demands, such as secession. Jenne’s theory of these dynamics explains why minorities shift their demands over time. The basic idea is that minority groups radicalize their demands when they enjoy significant external support, even when the central government has committed to protecting minority rights. Conversely, minority groups temper their demands, even if the central government pursues repression, when outside support is minimal or non-existent. This reasoning provides a compelling alternative to explanations based on credible commitments, security dilemmas, structural and historical factors, and casts some doubt on theories that focus on the host state’s policy in explaining secession (see also Jenne, Saideman, and Lowe 2007 for a quantitative test; Saideman and Jenne 2009) (see also Chapter 14).

Closely related to the literature on the effects of external involvement is scholarship addressing its causes: why do some external actors involve themselves in the secessionist struggles of their neighbors, while others refrain, or even actively discourage separatism? If the involvement of external actors explains important aspects of secessionist dynamics, then what explains why external actors become involved in the first place?

Saideman (1997) takes this important question head on, challenging the prominent “vulnerability” argument, which has been used to explain the restraint of foreign powers in aiding secessionists in neighboring countries, and, most notably, in accounting for Africa’s so-called “secessionist deficit” (see also Chapter 14). Vulnerability to secession at home has allegedly inhibited African states from supporting secessionists abroad (Herbst 1989, 1992; Englebert and Hummel 2005). As one scholar put it: “the greatest deterrent to territorial revision has been the
1 fear of opening a Pandora’s box. If any boundary is seriously questioned, why not 2 [question] all the boundaries in Western Africa?” (Zartman 1966: 109; Jackson 1990, 3 1992; Saideman 1997: 722). Other scholars have sought to extend this logic to the 4 European context (Nakarada 1991; Steinberg 1993; Woodward 1995).

5 Despite its plausibility, the theory has received relatively little empirical support, in part, perhaps because its predictions are indeterminate for states that are not 6 “vulnerable” to secession. It is unclear how the theory can explain why states that 7 are vulnerable to secession at home have engaged in overt and tacit support for 8 insurgents in neighboring states through the horn of Africa, as well as in Central 9 and West Africa (Saideman 1997: 724–6). Empirically, many states that intervene 10 in their neighbors’ secessionist conflicts have separatists in their own front yard 11 (Heraclides 1990). Russia is a multiethnic state whose secessionist insurgency in 12 Chechnya has done little to dampen its support for separatism in Transdniestria, 13 Abkhazia, Crimea, and South Ossetia at various times.

14 The theory of ethnic ties, which stands as the main alternative, argues that 15 ethnic affinity between external states and host state minority groups increases 16 the likelihood of support. According to Saideman, in its extreme form, support 17 stemming from ethnic ties can assume the form of irredentism, but lesser forms of 18 support (diplomatic support, arms sales, subsidies, border lenience) can be critical to 19 the success of a secessionist movement and are certainly also worthy of explanation. 20 Unlike vulnerability, which merely explains the absence of interference, ethnic ties 21 have the advantage of serving both to compel and to constrain states that may be 22 considering involvement in other states’ secessionist struggles. The theory of ethnic 23 ties predicts that support for the secessionists will follow from states in which the 24 ruling elite’s constituency has ethnic ties to the secessionists. By contrast, states in 25 which the ruling elite’s constituency has ethnic ties to the state, support for the host 26 state is predicted to follow. Cases in which the ruling elite’s constituency has ethnic 27 ties to both or neither, support is predicted for both sides or neither side (Carment 28 1994; Saideman 1997: 728; Saideman 2002, 2007) (see also Chapter 14).

29 Carment (1994: 577–8, n.130) argues that

30 ... defining transnational affinity is difficult, however, because there is more 31 than one way to establish ethnic identity. Race, religion, tribal (kinship) and 32 linguistic cleavages may not coincide, so affinity in one area (linguistic) 33 may be at odds with another area (kinship). Moreover, elites can attempt to 34 mobilize other transnational identities (pan-Arabism as opposed to Islam, 35 for example) or cultural subsystems at the expense of transnational ethnic 36 affinities. In sum, ethnic linkage with a group in another state does not 37 guarantee mutual interest.

38 It is therefore not surprising that the ethnic ties logic may over-predict foreign 39 interference where ethnic ties exist, and under-predict it when such ties do not 40 exist.

41 Many states have ethnic kin on the other side of their border with neighboring 42 states—in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, and elsewhere—yet only rarely do these 43
Explaining Secession

1 ethnic ties produce support for secessionists, or host states. Even less frequently do such ethnic ties lead to irredentism, which one scholar called “the prerogative of the few” (Horowitz 1985, 1991; Saideman and Ayres 2008). Sometimes states with strong ethnic ties to a minority on the other side of their border act with intense restraint, even actively detaining individuals promoting separatism, while strongly supporting its ethnic kin in other states (Siroky 2010). Cases like these, which abound in other parts of the world as well, are difficult to explain within the context of the ethnic ties framework. Finally, states without ethnic ties to either the secessionists or the host states sometimes become involved but the theory does not illuminate these cases.

It stands to reason that advancing this debate requires expanding the scope of vulnerability to include non-secessionist forms of vulnerability, including political and economic vulnerability at the interstate level, and also extending the idea of ethnic ties to incorporate non-ethnic ties, particularly “strategic ties.” Strategic ties are those links between states—economic, political, and military—that determine the overall level of incentive-based cooperation between states. This feature of state-to-state relations subsumes vulnerabilities to secession at home and can supersede ethnic ties in some cases. In addition to interference in the presence of ethnic ties, it can also predict interference in the absence of ethnic ties, and can predict restraint even in the presence of ethnic ties. It can also explain cases that the logic of ethnic ties, which stands as the main alternative framework, may not be able to explain because either (1) ethnic ties exist but the external actor is inactive, or (2) there are no ethnic ties, but the external actor is nevertheless engaged.

The first prediction from this strategic perspective would be that a foreign state with strong strategic ties—which stems from economic dependence or geographic necessity—is highly unlikely to support secessionists in the host state, even if ethnic ties are present and domestic vulnerability is absent. The foreign power is likely to support the central government, provided that it becomes involved at all, when strategic ties (a form of interstate vulnerability) are significant. By contrast, strong strategic enmity—resulting from regional balance of power considerations, discrimination of ethnic kin, or the strategic value of territory—increases the probability that the foreign power supports secessionists in the host state over the central government. The extent and duration of support, and whether it assumes an ideational or material form, will depend not only on group characteristics but on the salience of these strategies ties with the host state.

This theoretical framework takes account of an important empirical fact—that external support for secessionists can come from all sorts of states, whether or not they possess ethnic ties, and regardless of their domestic vulnerability to secession (Byman et al. 2001; Siroky 2010). Support for Eritrean secessionists came from China, Kuwait, Libya, South Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Sudan, and the USSR. Explaining the interference of this motley crew requires a framework that extends beyond ethnic ties and vulnerability to include classic international relations considerations like strategic interest, supporting the enemies of one’s enemy, spreading one’s own ideology, and gaining an advantage in regional rivalries (for a further discussion of these issues see Chapter 14).
Ethnic ties seem to promote restraint as much if not more than they promote intervention, much to the dismay of the separatists with limited options of outside support. In instances in which irredentist states become involved in separatist conflicts, one might contend that these cases should be analyzed separately, since they possess distinct motives. Yet there is good reason to believe that irredentist states are similarly propelled and constrained by international political considerations, even when they are cloaked in the garb of redeeming ethnic kin (Saideman 2000; Saideman and Ayres 2008). States considering intervening or supporting separatists will frequently face multiple, often competing, considerations, domestic and international, ethnic and strategic. It is not my contention that strategic interests are the only consideration, but that they tend to trump others in the calculus of confrontation. It predicts that states with strong strategic ties to the host state will generally refrain from supporting separatists, at a minimum, and will support the central government, if needed, even in the face of ethnic ties.

In contrast to arguments that focus on the role of domestic ethnic politics, the strategic ties logic is explicitly an international theory, one that moves the focus away from group characteristics and host state behavior to include international relations and foreign policy objectives. This framework enables us to predict the full range of theoretically possible and empirically relevant outcomes, and is valid for all states, not only states which are vulnerable to secession, or states which possess ethnic ties. It allows us to explain the full array of external action, including behavior that is unexpected and cannot be derived from either domestic vulnerability or ethnic ties theories.

Take the South Caucasus region, a veritable laboratory of overlapping ethnic groups, separatist sentiments, and revisionist states. How can we explain Armenia’s strong support of its ethnic kin in Azerbaijan, but its suppression of separatism by its ethnic kin in Georgia? The strategic ties perspective highlights Azerbaijan’s interdependence with Georgia—mainly resulting from its geographic dependence on Georgia as a transit route to the sea and to its main trading partner, Russia. One reporter noted “[the Georgian–Russian crisis] once again highlighted Armenia’s economic and transit dependence on Georgia. Just a few days and weeks of internal instability in Georgia was enough to create a shortage of essential goods in our country” (Hakobyan 2008).

Armenian behavior is therefore restrained in Javakheti, because of its strategic ties to Georgia, but not in Karabakh, because strategic ties with Azerbaijan are fewer, and direct ties between Yerevan and Stepanakert in Karabakh are significant. The ethnic ties logic cannot explain this variation, since ethnicity is constant across the cases. Similarly, Russian involvement in Ossetia and Abkhazia cannot be explained by ethnic ties or by reference to the vulnerability argument, which would counsel against supporting more separatism in the Caucasus, especially in view of Chechnya and, to a lesser extent, Tatarstan (Frombgen 1999; Sharaftudinova 2000).

The above discussion of external forces and foreign powers is not intended to exhaust the range of approaches to the international dimensions of secession, which is a burgeoning area of research, but only to outline a few important arguments, explanations, and debates, and to suggest some promising avenues for

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current and future research. Some important issues associated with foreign powers and secession have been neglected due to space constraints, but represent other international approaches to understanding and explaining secession: some of these issues include the international politics of secessionist state recognition, the spread of secession and the issue of diasporas (Brubaker 1995; King and Melvin 1999; Fox 2001; Shain 2002; Saideman 2002, 2007; Belanger, Duchesne and Paquin 2005; Carment, James and Taydas 2006; Coggins 2006; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Gleditsch 2007; Gleditsch, Salehyan and Schultz 2008).

Future theoretical and empirical work on secession should aim to further integrate the three levels of analysis highlighted in this essay, exploring the complex interaction of domestic and international politics that ultimately explain secession.

After Secession

Explaining secession is not only about the struggle for separation and cohesion in a united polity, but also about what happens after secession achieves its target and creates two states where previously there was only one. This dimension of separatism has produced a vigorous debate in the literature that goes to the heart of what social science can contribute to policy toward secession, which oscillates between a belief that secession may be a solution to ethnic conflict, “when all else fails,” and a conviction that secession is more likely to be the source of new conflicts, even if it “resolves” old ones. In this more skeletal view, secession, much like partition after civil war, does not resolve ethnic conflicts, but merely reorders them and creates new forms of violence.

There are numerous reasons why post-secessionist states may find themselves embroiled in violence, and there are several forms that the violence may assume. Some of the literature has focused on the problem of interstate conflict after separation, whether between the new state and the rump state, or with a new neighbor (Tir 2003, 2005). These studies show that ethnically based territorial disputes play a much greater role in conflict onset than do their economically or strategically based counterparts, and that peaceful secessions are, perhaps not surprisingly, more likely to lead to peaceful relations than violent secessions. Others have focused on the problem of civil war recurrence after partition (Sambanis 2000), finding that partition may reduce residual violence, but does not reduce civil war recurrence (Sambanis and Schulhofer-Wohl 2009). Just as critical to evaluating the effects of separation on conflict reduction is the problem of recursive secessionist conflict, that is, the prospect of a new secessionist civil war (Beran 1984; Pavković 2000; Siroky 2010). More often than not, new states are heterogeneous—minorities are part of the package: some supported the movement for independence, others opposed it, but both must confront the prospect of living in the new state under new rules. If what may have appeared as a unified and more or less homogenous polity, may seem less so after independence is achieved. One reason is that the division of the spoils in the new state creates
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incentives for new groups to form and mobilize. Another is that individuals often possess more than one (sometimes overlapping) ethnic identity from which to choose, which is likely to be influenced by the new institutional setting (Posner 2005), and the aggregation of these choices may make a country look quite different than it did before independence.

The problem of accommodating ethnic groups, whether long established or newly constructed, is not to be taken for granted in new states. Indeed, it is usually little more than an after-thought and an unwelcome guest at the table of many new nation-states. “Nationalizing states,” as Brubaker (1995) calls them, can make life for new minorities so unbearable that the risky struggle to fight their way out through secession becomes relatively attractive. In a sense, then, these recursive secessionists are merely following the example set for them by their host states, which recently seceded themselves. Needless to say, post-secessionist host states see the comparison differently.

Nonetheless, the pattern is a familiar one: oppressed nations pursue independent statehood to ensure their survival, and achieve independence only to oppress their own minorities. For this reason, recursive secessionist conflict presents one of the greatest threats to the emerging state’s stability, security, and prosperity. Although recursive secession constitutes a persistent pattern worthy of explanation, discussions of secession have devoted surprisingly little attention to this specific form of violence (for an exception, see Pavković 2000). Investigating this violence can advance the current state of debate over secession’s aftermath by identifying the conditions under which secession and partition reorder conflicts or are able to resolve them. It also speaks to the literature on democratic politics in divided societies and to debates on the effectiveness of repression, accommodation, and indiscriminate violence in counterinsurgency campaigns.

The debate on whether partition and secession represent peaceful solutions to ethnic conflict can be cruelly divided into two camps. The first argues that, if the groups cannot get along, then the best way forward is to let them simply part ways, separating the warring parties into defensible enclaves (Mearsheimer and Pape 1993; Mearsheimer and Van Evera 1995; Kaufmann 1996, 1998; Tullberg and Tullberg 1997; Downes 2004; Johnson 2008). In this view, secession and partition are policy solutions to “intractable” domestic-level disputes.

Other scholars disagree (Kumar 1997; Sambanis 2000: 479ff; Horowitz 2003). Sambanis and Schulhofer-Wohl (2009) provide compelling large-N evidence that partition does not prevent civil war recurrence. Scholars also contest some of the assumptions on which the policy of redrawing borders is based—that secession can actually produce “homogeneous homelands.” “Neither secessionist nor rump states are homogenous,” writes one scholar, “…there is no clean break … what looks homogenous today in an undivided state in which large groups oppose each other can look quite different after a secessionist state establishes itself” (Horowitz 1998: 191). This is both because borders cannot be redrawn so as to include only one group and exclude all the others and also because even groups that look homogeneous before the break can look fractionalized, heterogeneous, or divided in the new political setting.
Conceding this critique, some proponents of secession have suggested “population transfers” to ensure a “clean cut” after secession: “facilitate the dismantling of war-torn multiethnic states and the transfer of populations into ethnic enclaves, or homogenous homelands” (Kaufmann 1996: 137). When secession seems to lead to further conflict, it is argued, this is only because the cut was not clean in the first place (Johnson 2008; Johnson, Horowitz and Weisiger 2009); and that is why it is sometimes necessary to move populations and not only borders. But, as others have noted, “population transfer only sounds hygienic” (Horowitz 1985: 592). The major historical example of it—the exchange of Greeks and Turks provided for in the “Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations,” signed in Lausanne (1923)—was an ugly affair and does not bode well as a general policy prescription.

Though there are clear limits to what can be learned from a single case, Lausanne demonstrates that moving populations, even if planned with cold precision, can be a bloody affair. The transfer of Indians in the early American Republic, or Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia after World War Two, are unlikely to be used as best practice templates any time soon.

It could be countered that future ethnic violence may ensue if populations are not moved; we can of course never know for certain whether there would have been more or less violence had those same groups stayed within that same state, but this line of reasoning is less of an argument for population transfers than it is an effort to trade in counterfactual futures of human suffering—exchanging the alleged elimination of uncertain bloodshed in the future for the certainty of (presumably less) suffering in the present. Trading off uncertain future suffering for certain present suffering is a tradeoff few would be willing to make. Phrased in this manner, moreover, the policy is unlikely to appeal either to the populations involved or to international organizations which would presumably have a large role in any international transfer of peoples.

Put differently, secession may not be the political analog of marital divorce, and a “clean cut” may be nothing more than a nice phrase (Buchanan 1991; Tullberg and Tullberg 1997: 4; Horowitz 1998: 191; Aronovitch 2000). There are also practical issues that make such an analogy flawed: the number of states is in the hundreds, but the number of current “nations” is in the thousands (Van Evera 1994; Laitin 1995). Some scholars have therefore suggested that efforts should be focused upon internal rearrangements, such as designing institutions to increase the satisfaction of minorities in existing states (Hechter 2000a), rather than breaking up states in a Sisyphean attempt to make nation and state tantamount (Horowitz 1998: 191; Horowitz 2003). Needless to say, incentives to implement accommodative policy options would be significantly diminished by supporting secession as a general solution to ethnic conflict, and could possibly create moral hazard problems that encourage rather than reduce violence by promising intervention to promote partition (Fearon 2004b; Kuperman 2008).

Proponents of partition and secession might retort that institutions rarely have any significant impact on reducing conflict, especially at the international level (Mearsheimer 1994/95). Secession or partition, however unpleasant, is really the
only way to solve deep ethnic conflicts, and is therefore also the most humane (on recent attempts to apply this logic to Iraq, see Cockburn 2006; Kaufmann 2006; Galbraith 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Gelb 2003, 2006). However contentious this argument remains at the interstate level, it has far fewer adherents at the sub-national level, where institutions are widely believed to influence the behavior of individuals and groups (Lipshart 1977, 1995, 2004; Lustick 1979; Horowitz 1990; Lustick, Miodownik, and Eidelson 2004; Posner 2005).

Of course, this debate would be moot if states could more or less peacefully agree to part ways, as did Norway–Sweden, Slovakia–Czech Republic, or Iceland–Denmark (see Part VI). But states willing to part peacefully with a portion of their territory are rare. More common is a violent struggle over separation that is unlikely to result in the creation of a new state. Even when a new state emerges through secession, as it has several dozen times over the past two centuries, the incidence of various forms of violence after secession—including ethnic riots and protests, center-seeking civil wars, recursive secessions, and interstate militarized disputes—is far from negligible (Siroky 2009). Secession rarely marks the end of ethnicity or violence.

Recent research on secession has benefited from systematic studies of the reasons why, and the conditions under which, each variety of violence is likely to ensue in the aftermath of partition and secession. Additional work might profitably pursue comparisons between the fates of partitioned places, secessionist states, and decolonized countries, a task that is both called for by the apparent similarities and ridden with difficulties by the clear differences.

It is unlikely that we have seen the end of secession as a problem in world affairs, so additional work on this subject is not only needed to advance understanding of secession as an historical phenomena but also to craft more effective strategies for confronting the challenge of separatism and related phenomena.

Conclusions

Secession is a thorny political topic. As a subject of scholarly inquiry, it is filled with intense nuance, and therefore worthy of the sort of multidisciplinary attention that it has received in this volume. As a problem that is unlikely to disappear anytime soon, explaining secession is necessarily concerned with understanding historical data and with current political developments. Secession is also possible to evaluate out of humanitarian concern to reduce human suffering and tragedy where possible. As a complex problem, it is appropriate that it is being approached from the perspectives of philosophy, politics, economics, sociology, and psychology. To organize some of this sundry scholarship involves recognizing that explaining secession involves modeling the interaction of interest and passion among multiple strategic and interdependent actors (groups, states, and foreign powers).

The purpose of this chapter has been two-fold: first to take stock and examine what we know about secession, while providing the basis for an analytical and
Theoretical framework to explain secession, and second to highlight several important directions in recent research and to make some conjectures that might be helpful for future research. The framework offered in this chapter is a multilevel one, organized around the political actors most clearly involved in secession: ethnic groups, host states, and foreign powers. By dividing and organizing the literature in this way, we can more easily understand how scholars have framed the issues and drawn attention to different aspects of the problem, thus enabling us to see secession as the consequence of many actors’ interactions.

The basic framework has three levels, according to the unit of analysis. The first level includes studies that focus on the secessionist movement or ethnic group as the key actor; the second concentrates on state behavior toward minorities and state-level characteristics; and the third set addresses the role of external actors and foreign powers. This tripartite framework provides a simple structure that is parsimonious but still able to arrange seemingly disparate studies and to underscore their similarities.

At the ethnic group level, the literature identifies political grievances, economic inequality, ethno-demography, and ethno-geography as key factors in explaining secession. Other studies at the host state level focus on the dynamics of repression, violence, dissent, and accommodation along with institutional characteristics of the state, including its relative strength and capacity. At the third level are studies that examine the behavior and effect of external powers on secession.

Although the levels are separated for analysis, each highlighting different dynamics, one cannot help but notice important interactions between levels. Explaining secession, I have suggested, requires understanding this triadic structure at the core of the secession data generating process, but a coherent explanation for secession must account for interactions. There is little doubt that much important work remains to be done to further our understanding of secession and to enhance our ability to explain, predict, and address it (see also Chapters 10–15).

While much of this chapter has taken the literature apart, it also has suggested several ways in which future work might judiciously put it back together. Progress on this front should be both theoretical—linking actions and incentives at different levels through causal mechanisms—and methodological, combining sub-national, spatio-temporal, and relational data, connecting micro-level data to macro-level events, matching measurement to theory, in order to explain secession’s emergence, endurance and escalation.
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