

THE LIFECYCLE OF SECESSION

Interactions, processes and predictions

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Secession – much of it violent – has been a recurrent refrain in modern world history. New nation-states have often come from the convulsive fall of empires, the dissolution of federations, or the forcible unification of governed and ungoverned territories. Violence has often been the price of freedom and what has earned many nations the right to be recognized as sovereign entities. Secessionist violence involves acts of personal sacrifice, but also mass atrocities against populations that are targeted to be eliminated, cleansed, or expelled from the nation's imagined homeland. History has sometimes condemned such violence, usually when secessionists were defeated, or glorified it, following a victory that (re)creates a sovereign state and nurtures the nation's solidarity, buttressed by its own myths about the nation's violent birth. Secessionist sentiment is expressed in movements, protests, or claims for greater self-determination by groups or 'distinct communities' that often feel excluded, marginalized, or too culturally distinct to remain incorporated in a larger political entity. While self-determination struggles are frequently seen as justified and glorified from within, secession typically appears unjustified, destabilizing, and costly to the non-secessionist segments of the country, to external states, and to international organizations.¹

For Abraham Lincoln, as a recently sworn-in American president, Southern secessionism was "the essence of anarchy", a violation of the constitutional provisions protecting the majority from a tyrannical and discontented minority (Lincoln 1861a). Once mobilized, popular sentiment in favor of secession can become a force that disintegrates empires and integrates nations. As such, secessionism presents a challenge that invites a swift response from the state. In Lincoln's words, it is a challenge that "no government can possibly endure" (Lincoln 1861b).² Where secessionist sentiment takes hold, state-sponsored violence frequently follows, just as it did in the American context in 1861. The US Civil War over secession was so bloody that it killed roughly as many Americans in four years as have died in all other foreign and domestic wars collectively since the American Revolutionary War.³

The American experience is not unique, however. Indeed, most states in the world have experienced secession in their own country in some form at some point, at least once and sometimes more frequently. More than a few dozen states are still in the midst of separatist struggles today, both in the developed world (e.g., Canada, France, Spain, the United Kingdom) and in the developing world (e.g., Cameroon, Georgia, Indonesia, Ukraine). Societies that experience separatism have been unable to forge an underlying social consensus regarding the appropriate

limits of state authority, and norms and responsibilities of citizenship are contested among different social groups. These failures may be due to deep cultural cleavages or to historically contingent failures in state-building and nation-building. Paraphrasing Ernest Gellner's famous metaphor, we can think of societies with separatist groups as 'wild gardens' in which a shared national culture was never cultivated.

This chapter investigates the 'lifecycle of secession', that is, the four main stages through which self-determination movements may pass, from emergence and consolidation to escalation and recognition. As a political phenomenon, the desire for self-determination and the pursuit of secession underpin many modern civil wars; and civil wars are now – and have been for some time – the primary challenge to international peace and security, not to mention one of the greatest problems domestically in countries plagued by it for economic prosperity, solidarity, development and democracy.⁴ Predicting when, where and which demands for self-determination will emerge, consolidate, turn violent and gain recognition is thus a crucial task for everyone concerned with international security and world order as well as for those focused on democracy and development. To make accurate predictions, we therefore focus on theories and analyses that speak to the *when* and *where* of these disparate stages in the lifecycle of secession. As our review illustrates, most of the literature has emphasized description and explanation over prediction. One clear direction for future research would therefore be to recalibrate scholarship on secession toward a greater balance between the goals of description, explanation and prediction.

Self-determination, separatism, secession and nationalism are topics that have inspired vast literatures in political science, sociology, history, psychology and economics. Although our collective intuitions have been honed by prior contributions to those literatures, much can be gained from reviewing and integrating theoretical insights to motivate a more robust predictive framework for the study of secession. There is, alas, no unifying theory or canonical model that predicts which groups will make self-determination claims and which will remain quiescent, which self-determination movements will turn violent, or which ones will secure recognition. In the course of examining key insights, we aim to weave together a review and synthesis of what we do arguably know – and how confident we can be in our knowledge – and to think about secession in terms of how 'means and motives' operate (and in some cases interact) at different stages in the lifecycle of secession. This approach, we hope, may usefully inform future theorizing, analysis and prediction.

Thus far, civil wars – defined as large-scale armed conflicts between the government of a sovereign state and domestic opposition groups fighting over political goals – have been analyzed through the prism of a deceptively simple typology organized around the division between "greed and grievance".⁵ That approach, introduced in a seminal article by Collier and Hoeffler (2004), has served as something of an organizing principle for the quantitative study of civil war for the past two decades. There are several reasons that we believe the 'greed and grievance' distinction has outlived its analytical utility, and why a new framework would be potentially more valuable for the next era in the study of secession.

The 'greed and grievance' is a typology developed for civil wars in general rather than for secessionist conflicts specifically. As a result, the particularities of secessionist wars – and their distinct causes based in self-determination claims on the basis of territorial indigeneity, which other civil wars lack – have often been lost when they are lumped together with other types of political violence in quantitative studies. Second, 'greed' and 'grievance' are actually both 'motives' for individual behavior and collective action. This demand-focused typology therefore omits all the 'means' for mobilization and the capacity for collective action that have been the focus of so many studies. Sometimes, it is true, 'greed' is treated as a resource or an opportunity. However, thinking more carefully about 'greed', it is clear that it is really just another motive

like grievances. Moreover, greed is a motive that seems to be much more relevant in non-secessionist civil wars. Third, and perhaps most counterproductive, ‘greed’ and ‘grievance’ have often been treated as competing rather than interactive and sometimes mutually reinforcing explanations. To redress this issue, we propose a fresh heuristic based on the interaction of means and motives during the lifecycle of secession with the goal of improving the predictive accuracy of our models.

Means and motives

Our proposed framework emphasizes the basic distinction between *means* and *motives* during the lifecycle of secession.⁶ Explanations that focus on the ‘motives’ for mobilization typically emphasize the reasons that make secessionist movements appealing to the masses. We discuss several kinds of motives, including those generated by modernization, economic inequality, political exclusion, psychological processes, and cultural differences. Most of the early literature on secession focused on motives in the form of economic, political and cultural ‘grievances’, while the past 20 years of scholarship has paid more attention to factors that in our framework relate to the ‘means of mobilization’. These often include natural and other resources that can fuel and fund separatism, organizational capacity for mass mobilization, a favorable political opportunity structure, geography and institutions for collective action.

Scholars who emphasize the ‘means’ perspective believe that the key to understanding mobilization lies in factors that make collective action *feasible*, such as the group’s ability to acquire resources to mobilize people toward accomplishing the group’s goals (McAdam 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1978), and resources for leaders to offer selective incentives (Buhaug et al. 2011; Regan and Norton 2005), a large pool of fighters (Dube and Vargas 2013), low opportunity costs for rebellion (Besley and Persson 2011; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Miguel, Satyanath and Sergenti 2004), low state capacity (Besley and Persson 2009; Migdal 1988), natural resource and ethnic group concentration (Morelli and Rohner 2015), dense forests (Siroky and Dzutsev 2015), mountainous terrain (Fearon and Laitin 2003), and a favorable external environment with support by regional actors (Bormann, Sambanis and Toukan 2021). Much of the later wave of literature on civil war downplayed motives. Working on the assumption that motives are latent and abundant, these studies granted more attention to the set of conditions (‘the means’) that favor or render feasible violent mobilization. Recently, numerous scholars have advanced claims that implicitly or explicitly (using other terms) recognize the importance of both means and motives, and some studies that we discuss in this chapter have pointed to specific interactions which we believe should be emphasized even more in future studies.

Our framework builds on these efforts and uses the lens of motives and means for mobilization not only to assess what we know about secession, but also to bring together disparate studies and findings. In order to generate robust, multidimensional theories and reliable predictions of where and when secessionist violence will occur, we will need not only the predictive algorithms, but also an analytical framework that explores how means and motives interact at each stage in the lifecycle of secession. There should be renewed attention not only to the additive effects of means and motives, but also to dynamics and interactions. The first step is to identify studies that would help to move the field in this direction, for each stage in the lifecycle of secession, and then to examine which specific motives and means interact to produce collective action, and then to encode this information into predictive models.

An increasing number of studies of ‘civil wars’ have recognized the fundamental dynamics and interactions that bridge the motives and means perspectives on conflict. For instance, Østby et al. (2011) examine the interplay between scarcity and grievances, and Basedau et al. (2017) look

at the interaction of resources and political inequalities. Kuhn and Weidmann (2015) explore how different types of inequalities affect both an ethnic group's 'willingness' and 'opportunity' to fight, while Sambanis and Milanovic (2014) explain violent secessionism as the expression of excess demand for self-determination, created by different configurations of regional power, resources and inequality. Siroky et al. (2020) show how the interaction of relative deprivation and relative mobilization capacity interact to produce collective violence. There are many other studies in this spirit that emphasize and assess one or more crucial interaction between motives and means in generating war and conflict.

Too often in the past, theories of secession have attempted to establish a hierarchy between means and motives. Some scholars have noted that grievances (motives) are too widespread and static to account for variable and rare collective action. As a result, they concentrate instead on the resource capacity and political opportunities for mass mobilization in favor of secession. Others have observed that many separatist groups are quite resource-poor, however. These scholars show how –despite the lack of adequate means for collective action – grievances largely account for why and when groups mobilize. Both sides in these debates have offered valuable insights, but it stands to reason that group conflict is actually most likely when a group has *both* the strong grievances to motivate it and sufficient mobilization capacity for collective action. Just as these motives are necessary for the emergence of self-determination movements, so too are the means needed for their consolidation and escalation. Both dimensions remain crucial throughout the lifecycle of secession, but we conjecture that the relative importance between them shifts over time toward the means of mobilization and away from the motives that caused the movements to emerge in the first instance. Our framework proposes a systematic way to analyze these dynamics, with the ultimate goal of creating predictive models for each stage in the lifecycle of secession, and by improving our ability to anticipate violent escalation hopefully saving more human lives.

The lifecycle of secession

A standard approach in the social sciences treats secession as a binary phenomenon – it either occurs or it does not. While this approach certainly makes some sense, it clearly obscures by lumping together all the distinct stages in what we refer to in this chapter as 'the lifecycle of secession'. As a result, it necessarily limits our understanding of the transformation of self-determination claims from nonviolence to violence, and prevents us from addressing a range of pertinent questions that fall in between. This chapter breaks with this conventional practice by considering the entire process of secession, starting from the emergence of demands for self-determination, through separatist war and up to recognition. This more dynamic approach allows us to explore whether means and motives – and *which* means and motives – interact at each stage in the process of secession.

We highlight four stages of this process-driven approach: *emergence*, *consolidation*, *escalation* and *recognition*. Emergence refers to the expression of group claims for self-determination out of a population of potential self-determination movements (any territorially concentrated group can potentially make claims for greater autonomy). Emergence implies that latent sentiment for self-determination leads to the formation of organizations, parties or groups that make public claims for ethno-territorial autonomy or independence. Consolidation refers to the period of non-violent activity (protest, petitions, recruitment, coalition formation) by self-determination movements (SDMs). Escalation refers to the switch from non-violent claim-making to secessionist violence. Recognition refers to acquiring international status as a new country by already existing ones, and then joining the United Nations with all attendant rights and responsibilities.

Our approach aims to reorient scholarly attention to the unique features of each stage in the lifecycle of secession and the transitions from one stage to the next. These dynamics cannot be addressed in the usual way, that is, with slow-moving or static, monadic and structural explanations. The interactions between the groups seeking greater self-determination and the state from which they seek greater independence, together with the wider regional and international context, must be brought into greater focus. Previous examples of *processual* analyses that focus on the dynamics of secessionist conflict have taken a country-specific approach, typically focused on large, politically important countries such as China, Russia, India or Nigeria. Those countries have seen their fair share of conflict and separatism, and therefore a lot has been written about them. However, as Gellner (1983: 45) noted, ‘for every effective nationalism, there are n potential ones . . . which do not bother to struggle, which fail to activate their potential nationalism, which do not even try’. While some global quantitative analyses have sought to address this imbalance and have offered key insights, major limitations remain, not only concerning causality but also regarding prediction.

There is no easy fix for this problem. Our goal in this chapter is to focus attention on studies and findings about secession that bring us closer to theorizing the *processes* and *interactions*. Quantitative modeling must incorporate these processes and interactions between ‘motives’ and ‘means’ – and evaluate their relative contributions – in order to improve prediction at each stage in the secessionist process. Few studies have systematically distinguished and examined stages or interactions, and those that have done one or the other have not done so with the aim of improving prediction.

We analyze claims for self-determination as emerging from a conscious effort to improve the welfare of a group. Thinking about the costs and benefits – and what self-determination is ‘worth’ to individuals – naturally brings to focus economic theories of secession. Yet a deficiency of an economic approach – much like the focus on quantitative studies of ‘civil war’ – is that it sees nothing special in *separatist* civil war – individual participation is motivated by the same cost-benefit calculations that might also explain violent crime or participation in protests or riots. Separatists in some economic studies are largely indistinguishable from criminals, bandits, rebels or pirates. The role of state legitimacy, relative deprivation, ethnic identity, and emotional as well as symbolic attachments rarely if ever enter into economic thinking about secession.

At the same time, political theories of separatist war due to ‘grievances’, motivated, for example, by political exclusion or ethnic differences, might over-predict the outcome; at some level, almost all claims for self-determination are motivated by such grievances, as critics have rightly observed. But why do some grievances produce mass mobilization while others remain elite affairs? Why are some violent and others not? Why do some escalate from peaceful to violent secession? Are the factors that predict the emergence of demands for secession the same as those that predict the escalation of self-determination movements (SDMs) to violence, or those that account for their international recognition as new states? While there are many compelling answers to these questions in the literature already, not enough studies focus on dynamics, processes and prediction. This chapter proposes a fresh way to organize the large, sprawling quantitative literature on secession, and thereby aims to provide a solid foundation for future studies on secessionist dynamics, processes and predictions. Our contribution focuses on the core *motives* and *means*, along with their interactions, at each step in the lifecycle of secession – *emergence*, *consolidation*, *escalation*, *recognition*.

Emergence

The first stage in the lifecycle of secession is the *emergence* of a claim-making self-determination movement. The implicit baseline for comparison when analyzing the emergence stage is all the other ethnic or ethno-territorial groups that do not make self-determination claims. Generally,

writers have argued that the emergence requires, at a minimum, a distinct cultural community, and usually a territorial basis. Beyond these basic necessary conditions, a variety of theories have been proposed, but most of what has been written on this subject can be classified as adopting an approach focused more on the motives or the means for emergence, while a few (in our view, not enough) studies underscore the interactions between them as key to the materialization of self-determination movements.

System-level and macro-historical explanations are important in understanding global and regional patterns – spikes and slumps in the emergence of SDMs over time – but typically fail to shed much light on cross-group and cross-national differences. “[While] the powerful ideology of self-determination helps explain the emergence of a political environment hospitable to territorially divisive claims”, Horowitz points out (1981: 166), “it cannot explain which groups will take up the cause”. In other words, a permissive international environment – one in which security and prosperity would not be significantly diminished by exiting the current polity, or one in which an international norm favoring self-determination exists (e.g., Griffiths 2016)⁷ – is likely to induce a greater frequency of separatist movements and might induce the transformation of latent sentiment for SDMs into actual claim-making movements. But such systemic variables are less likely to predict particular instances of secession emerging, or to explain the timing of such movements arising or escalating. In short, a permissive international environment provides an opportunity that some groups – but not others, due to the absence of motives, means or both – will seize to form SDMs.

Hechter (2000) also provides a different macro-historical account, with greater specificity in explaining which groups will seek secession, where and when. He argues that nationalist or separatist movements have tended to emerge only where and when there was a shift to direct rule which challenged traditional authority structures and powerholders in peripheral areas of multinational polities. Against the background of this shift to direct rule, the ideology of nationalism and self-determination affords legitimacy to nascent secessions. A related argument emphasizes the regional diffusion of SDMs (e.g., Cunningham and Sawyer 2017), observing that effective secessions inspire other groups to also seek it and legitimize their efforts. Such spillovers enhance each individual group’s means to mobilize, creating a permissive regional environment for secession.

Such perspectives for secession do not go far enough in explaining which groups will seek SDM or when their movements will emerge. Moving down to the regional and group levels brings us closer to the action. Focusing on the means for secessionist mobilization, for example, Jenne et al. (2007) shows that the relative power of groups plays a critical role in the emergence of secession, which is much more likely among ‘strong’ than ‘weak’ groups. In addition to ‘power’, much of the literature has focused on the role of wealth as an indicator of relative position, sometimes using the region and at other times taking the group as the primary unit of analysis. As Wallerstein (1961: 88) noted: “inevitably, some regions will be richer (less poor) than others, and claims to power combined with relative wealth make the case for secession strong”. On average studies have indeed found that regions in advanced democracies with higher income levels – as well as recent histories of independence and larger populations – were more likely to pursue secession (Sorens 2005). Berkowitz (1997) created a model of the relationship between changes in regional income and secessionist pressures in the periphery within a fiscal federation, and then assessed it using developments over time in the peripheral Russian regions of Bashkortostan, Chechnia, Tatarstan and Sakha (Yakutia), which have experienced significant income gains and losses during the transition to a market economy.

Horowitz (1981: 172) also emphasized relative positions, but considered both the group’s and the region’s power simultaneously, writing: “the interplay of relative group position and relative

regional position determines the emergence of separatism". This led him to suggest that secession was most likely to emerge in the developing world amid 'backward groups' in 'backward regions' rather than amid powerful and rich regions and groups.⁸ Backwardness may be endogenous to neglect – a condition that often applies to peripheral regions of weaker states – but it is not the distance *per se* that renders secession possible or desirable among backward groups so much as the economic and political neglect from the central government – what Cederman and co-authors (e.g., 2013) have labeled 'political exclusion'. Backwardness may therefore be related to motives – especially grievances resulting from exclusion, poverty and inequality – as much as, if not more than, means.

Most of these structural accounts assume that the ethnic groups in question are geographically concentrated, without which the emergence of separatism is much less likely (e.g., Toft 2003). Geographic factors – not only concentration, but others such as mountainous terrain or dense forests – are largely constants and therefore have done little to shed light on the variable phenomenon of interest – the emergence of secession – and are unlikely to help us predict the future location, timing or scale of particular secessions. At best, they facilitate tendencies that are driven by non-geographic factors. Scholars also need to study the reason for attachment to the land – whether economic, strategic or symbolic motives contribute to secessionist mobilization. For example, Kelle (2017) suggests groups are more likely to call for self-rule when they attach symbolic meaning to their territory than when they assign strategic or material relevance to their land. The reason, she suggests, is that symbolic attachments have positive effects on group solidarity and cohesion, which facilitates mobilization. In general, geography has been highlighted mostly because it provides the means for groups to mobilize for secession, but the reasons for attachment to the land can shed light on the motives for secessionist mobilization.

One of the most important areas of research on the emergence of secession has focused on institutions. Perhaps nowhere is this more visible than in the study of secession from the former Soviet Union, where much of the early literature focused on the institutional means that some groups, but not others, had to exploit for establishing their claims to secession. Roeder (1991) assessed the rise of assertive ethnofederalism in the Soviet Union, and focused on the role of federal institutions in explaining variation in protests, and in understanding the assertiveness of relatively advantaged ethnic groups. Gorenburg (2003) also argued that the Soviet state structure played a primary role in the rise of nationalist movements. Pre-existing ethnic institutions profoundly influenced the means available to secessionist movement leaders and shaped their separatist behavior. Hale's work (2000) also examined why some ethnic regions pursued secession from the former Soviet Union, whereas others strove to save the same multinational state. Bringing together means and motives perspectives, Hale argued that regions were more likely to be separatist when they were less assimilated, increasing the demand for more autonomy, and were both wealthier and possessed a high level of self-rule, which afforded the means for mobilization. Smith (2013) focuses on comparing these Soviet ethnofederalism legacies with other regions to assess their external validity. Without challenging the emphasis on institutions *per se*, Grigoryan (2012) criticizes the argument that the ethnofederal designs of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were at the root of the violent conflicts after the breakup of the countries. He contends that these ethnofederal designs were themselves the results of previous nationalist mobilizations in the Russian empire and the Balkans. In short, the institutions were endogenous to prior mobilization.

Regardless of prior ethnofederal institutions, the process of democratization can itself created new motivations for the emergence of separatist movements by generating greater demand among citizens for nationalist politics. Giuliano (2006), for instance, shows how secessionism emerged in the former USSR from bottom-up motivations. Ethnofederal countries experiencing

democratization were more likely to experience secession because regional leaders acquired new incentives to seek secession in response to local constituencies who demanded it and whose support they needed to stay in office. In a later book, Giuliano (2011) links these elite incentives with mass participation, arguing that the ability of nationalist leaders to persuade others to connect their material interests with the fate of the nation is what led to mobilization in some – but not all – Russian republics. At the same time, her study shows that alternative accounts based on religion, language, cultural difference, demography and economic development all fail to deliver.

The non-emergence of secession is the other side of the same coin. Since states have a common interest in supporting international institutions and rules to prevent secessionism because they are themselves often vulnerable to secessionism, Jackson and Rosberg (1982) suggested that many states (in Africa, particularly) have avoided lending support to secessionist demands abroad. In some cases, this has arguably prevented the emergence and consolidation of secession. Saideman (1997) re-examines this issue, sometimes known as the Pandora's box of secession. Rather than vulnerability to secession at home, his study shows that ethnic ties with groups at home do more to explain external state behavior vis-à-vis secessionists in neighboring countries. The fall of Yugoslavia, the Nigerian civil war, and the crisis in Congo are used to illustrate this motive-oriented argument about why external states do or do not lend support to secessionists abroad. The non-emergence of secession, then, is largely a story about how some groups that possess the motives to secede lack the external means to do so.

All told, the literature on the emergence of secession has provided key insights but has chiefly focused mostly on structure rather than process, has privileged either means or motives over their interactions, and has concentrated on understanding and explaining rather than predicting. Future research could therefore benefit from recalibrating the study of the emergence of secession towards processes, interactions and predictions, which are also relevant to the 'consolidation' stage – the second stage in the lifecycle of secession.

Consolidation

Not all ethnic groups mobilize for secession, and among those who do, only a small number are able to consolidate themselves and sustain a political presence over time. Many movements disappear soon after they emerge, and this pattern has received scant attention compared to studies of the emergence of secessionist claims or the outbreak of secessionist war. As with the emergence of secessionist claims, the interaction between different motives and means shapes whether SDMs are able to consolidate and establish themselves over time.

In this stage, motives remain important, but whether a movement consolidates itself is increasingly about the means of mobilization. For example, Sorens (2011) emphasizes the role of natural resources in movement consolidation, and Capoccia et al. (2012) argue that demands for autonomy or secession tend to be more resilient when religious organizations, which afford greater capacity, make these demands. One reason religious organizations may have this effect is laid out in Hechter and Okamoto (2001), which focuses on the mechanisms that produce sustained minority group collective action. They argue that the prevention of free riding, the establishment of institutional arrangements producing demand for greater autonomy, and the development of distinctive social identities are the three keys to group solidarity and collective action.

This builds on Olson's seminal work (1965), which challenged the assumption, common at the time, that if all members of a group share common interests, then they will act collectively to achieve them regardless of the group's size. Olson's argument implies that secession depend

on group size, since collective action in pursuit of common interests that require the provision of public goods will induce more free-riding as the size of the group grows. Olson (1971: 28) calls this ‘the exploitation of the great by the small’. Optimality can be obtained only when the marginal costs are equal to the marginal benefits. This suggests that even when and where secessionist movements do emerge, due to the efforts of a small number of committed people, it will not be able to consolidate and sustain itself unless the free-rider problem is addressed. In the absence of selective incentives, or another solution, groups will fail to further their common interest (e.g., independence), and the movement will likely disappear over time. While small groups tend to provide public goods sub-optimally, larger groups often fail to produce them at all. Hechter’s work on group solidarity (1987), as a prerequisite for sustained collective action, argues that the conjunction of dependence on the group for collective goods and the group’s capacity to monitor and sanction members for noncompliance with obligations and norms determines whether a secessionist group will become a consolidated political force over time (Hechter and Pfaff 2020). In other words, the motivation for individuals to remain a member of the group and the group’s means to keep members in line is what shapes group solidarity and the consolidation of secessionist movements.

Also thinking about consolidation in terms of the means for enhancing organizational cohesion and group solidarity, Roeder (2018) asks how some secessionist campaigns manage to sustain themselves over time and establish secession as the only perceived viable option, while others falter and lose ground to non-secessionist groups. The answer lies in the ability of campaigns to coordinate expectations within their population on a common purpose. The strategy of programmatic coordination, drawing on Lenin’s language, makes independence the only possible option and renders the status quo untenable; in some cases, it justifies the use of violence.

Though most studies have focused on the country-level, region-level or group-level, it is also possible to see the interactions between means and motives in micro-level studies focused on individuals. For example, Hierro and Queralt (2021) investigate individual preferences on secession. Examining original survey data from Catalonia, they find that individuals who are excluded from public insurance because they are unemployed, as well as those who work in sectors and companies specialized in the host state market, are generally against secession. By contrast, those who specialize in foreign markets do not oppose independence. Their findings speak to the interaction of motives and means at the individual level, and underscore the importance of the role of risk associated with labor market asset specificity, building on Boix (2003), as a predictor of preferences for and against secession in secessionist regions.

Overall, the literature on the consolidation stage focuses on the means a bit more than on the motives in secessionist conflict. More of the literature on consolidation also examines processes as opposed to structures, which we view as positive. However, very little of this literature emphasizes interactions and almost none of it is explicitly predictive, both of which merit greater attention in future research. The next stage – escalation – has devoted somewhat more consideration to these two issues.

Escalation

The vast majority of SDMs are peaceful; only a small number resort to violence in pursuit of their claims for more autonomy (Sambanis, Germann and Schädel 2018). At the same time, SDMs seeking outright secession and independence are much more likely to use violence. Most of the literature has focused on these violent cases, yet the differences between violent and nonviolent SDMs remain understudies and therefore still quite poorly understood. The

decision to use violence in pursuit of autonomy marks a qualitative shift in an SDM (Germann and Sambanis 2021), which merits its own theorizing and analysis in the lifecycle of secession.

Violent conflict arises due to many reasons, but primary among them are the failure of state-building nationalism, the imposition of alien rule that is perceived illegitimate by an aspiring nation, the shift from indirect to direct rule (Hechter 2000, 2013), the political exclusion of territorially concentrated ethnic groups (Cederman et al. 2015), and lost autonomy (Siroky and Cuffe 2015). Most of these accounts emphasize motives, but often bring in means as a key component of the argument, though not necessarily in an interactive manner. For instance, Siroky and Cuffe (2015: 8) argue:

Retracted or lost autonomy provides a strong motive and need not significantly diminish the group's collective action capacity. Moreover, it considerably weakens the government's ability to make credible commitments that might otherwise prevent tensions from escalating . . . thereby increasing the probability of [violent] secession.

Accounts of conflict escalation from nonviolence to violence invariably focus on how the state responds to group claims. The difficulty consists in predicting which groups will make what type of claims in anticipation of the state's response. One prominent line of thinking focuses squarely on the state's strategy and conceptualizes it in light of the potential reputational effects that its current approach may have for future secessions. The reputational theory provides a story of escalation that centers on the motives for the state to escalate. Walter (2006, 2009) is probably most closely associated with this argument, contending that leaders are less likely to make concessions if they are concerned with establishing a reputation for strength; and they will be more concerned with building such a reputation if there are many ethnic groups that could potentially 'emerge' as future secessionists. That concern will lead states to take a hardline attitude, refusing to talk with claim-making groups as a strategy to dissuade others from making more costly claims in the future. Although this reputational logic might apply in some settings, Nilsson (2010) criticizes the theory. He finds that weaker rebel groups are more likely to reach a negotiated settlement with the government when the number of warring parties *increases*. Using global data on territorial concessions from 1989 to 2004, however, Forsberg (2013) finds no support for the claim that granting territorial concessions to an ethnic group spurs new separatist conflicts, either within or across borders.

While some scholars posit that governments tend to oppose secessionist demands to establish reputations that will hopefully prevent setting a precedent for others, Griffiths (2015) contends that administrative organization is a third option for states to handle secession demands: governments can use administrative lines to decide for which regions they should recognize secession rights – and for which regions they should not – without fear of setting a precedent for others and hurting their reputation. Sambanis, Germann and Schädel (2018) use a more expansive dataset on SDMs than those used by previous studies, and find no empirical support for the reputational theory of separatist conflict (B. Walter 2006). Specifically, they show that the number of other ethnic groups in a certain state that might potentially secede does not increase the probability of that state using violence against any particular SDM making claims nonviolently.

Instead of reputations, Cunningham (2011) argues that what determines whether secessionists receive concessions – or are confronted with state violence – is their internal structure. Internally divided SDMs – i.e., those that are *less* consolidated – are *more* likely to obtain concessions than those that are more united, yet concessions to unitary groups are more successful at resolving these disputes. This suggests that concessions are part of the bargaining process, and not merely a tool to resolve disputes. Butt (2017) argues that external security – and not internal structure or

reputation building – is what shapes whether or not states use violence against peripheral secessionist movements. When leaders believe that the potential state emerging from the secession will pose a greater threat to state security than the violent secession movement itself, then it is more likely to use violence in an effort to squelch it. This account puts the emphasis squarely on the state, and brings us back to the motivations for escalation – in this case, secessionist violence is motivated by concerns about future external security.

Basta (2021) focuses explicitly on multinational states (e.g., Belgium, Bosnia, Iraq), and shows that how central governments respond to self-determination demands, and with what political consequences, is not only material but also symbolic. That is, in order to explain escalation after the political economy demands of ethno-territorial groups have been satisfied, it is necessary to consider the symbolic claims and counterclaims of majority and minority communities. Lecours (2021) distinguishes between static and dynamic autonomy in regions within liberal democracies (Catalonia, Scotland, Flanders, South Tyrol, Basque, Québec, Puerto Rico), and argues that variation in separatism over time is shaped by the extent to which autonomy (i.e., concessions) evolves to accommodate shifting identity, interests and circumstances. Dynamic autonomy stems secession, while static autonomy stimulates it.

Among several different ‘means’ explanations for secessionist conflict, natural resource endowments have received extensive attention in the literature on violent escalation. For instance, Lujala (2009) explores the effect of natural resources on the severity of armed civil conflict and finds that secessionist conflicts in areas with hydrocarbon production are *the most severe*, while Hunziker and Cederman (2017) demonstrate that oil resources have a significant and robust impact on the probability of secessionist conflict escalation.

Other means-oriented theories emphasize institutions. Cederman et al. (2015) provide empirical evidence that both power-sharing and territorial autonomy have a strong conflict-preventing impact in circumstances where there is no previous dispute history. In post-conflict settings, however, only inclusion in power-sharing arrangements at the central level of government reduces the probability of conflict recurrence, while post-conflict regional autonomy is most likely ‘too little, too late’. Siroky and Cuffe (2015) suggest groups that have lost autonomy tend to have both strong capacity and incentive to pursue secession, whereas those that have never experienced autonomous institutional arrangements are unlikely to mobilize because they lack collective action capacity. Germann and Sambanis (2021) use a two-step approach to examine connections between lost autonomy and political exclusion, on the one hand, and the emergence and escalation of (non-)violent separatist claims, on the other. Their analysis finds that both political exclusion and lost autonomy are significantly correlated with the escalation of nonviolent claims for self-determination into violence, while lost autonomy is also a significant correlate of the emergence of nonviolent separatist claims.

Bakke (2015) shows that devolved governance – including regional autonomy arrangements and federalism – does not always preserve peace in states facing self-determination demands. Through in-depth case studies of Chechnya, Punjab and Québec, as well as a statistical cross-country analysis, she argues that the effects of policy, fiscal and political decentralization are conditional on the traits of the societies they (are meant to) govern. Specifically, she highlights three dimensions – the ethnic composition of a given unit such as republic, province or state; how much wealth it has; and the political connection between the center and periphery – that modify the effects of decentralization on violent secession.

Also emphasizing center-periphery relations, Lacina (2015) argues that ethnic groups sharing the periphery with the most powerful ethnic group in their country are less likely to be violent separatists. “Violent separatism”, she writes, “is the product of interactions between a central government and competing ethnic groups in the periphery”. Rebellions do not typically arise

from ethnic groups that have better access to the central executive compared to their neighbors in the periphery, since the center is likely to choose policies for the periphery that correspond to the favored group's interests. The lack of motivating grievances translates into a lower probability of separatist violence, which can also be deterred by a strong and clear central commitment to opposing interests in the periphery. Buhaug (2006) emphasizes the strength of the rebel group relative to the state as key to explaining whether aggrieved groups that resort to violence in order to redress their grievance seek to overthrow the ruling government or instead pursue secession. Beardsley, Cunningham, and White (2017) bring in the role of the UNSC's involvement in self-determination disputes, which their study demonstrates can substantially dampen the propensity for disputes between self-determination movements and their respective governments to escalate to civil war.

Finally, several studies make clear interactive arguments that bring together 'motives' and 'means' to explain violent secession, which we see a very welcome development. For instance, Cunningham (2013) argues that, compared to conventional politics, secessionist war is more likely to happen when self-determination groups are internally fragmented and larger, and when they have kin groups in adjoining states, face economic discrimination, demand independence and function in poorer countries. In other words, secessionist civil war is more likely when there is an explosive mix of both motives and means. Cederman, Wimmer and Min (2010) also bring 'means' and 'motives' together in demonstrating that ethnic groups tend to get involved in conflict with the government when they are excluded from state power, have higher mobilizing capacity and have experienced conflict in the past. This study indicates that motives are critical in all stages of secession, especially the emergence phase, whereas the means for mobilization appear to gain in relative importance as the movement-state interactions escalate into violent secession.

A final study by Breslawski and Ives (2019) directs our attention to ideology to bridge the motives and means perspectives, and illustrates how they interact inter-temporally. Factions with a strong religious ideology have incentives to use violence because the use of violence allows them to show their religious credentials in transnational networks to secure weapons, support and funding. On this count, motives based in a strong ideology combine with the means of mobilization to explain violent secession.

This brings secession to the last stage in the lifecycle of secession – international recognition and independence. What predicts whether an SDM will eventually be admitted to the 'club of nations'?

Recognition (independence)

The final stage in the lifecycle of a secession, for those movements that make it that far, is to become a new state. Easier said than done. The key is international recognition – the secret to joining the 'club of nations' – and not only or necessarily military victory on the battlefield. Crucial to examining secession is therefore the study of when and why aspiring states gain formal recognition from existing countries, and therefore also why some states refuse to extend recognition in certain cases.

External politics as a 'means' to recognition are crucial here, even more so than in earlier stages. As Horowitz (1981: 167) wrote: "whether a secessionist movement will achieve its aims . . . is determined largely by international politics, by the balance of interests and forces that extend beyond the state" (cf. Birch 1978). Coggins (2011, 2014) conducted one of the earlier explorations of state birth in international relations, and introduced an international-level model of state emergence. The means to gain recognition can also be internal. An internally

focused ‘means’ account assesses the role of violence in recognition. Griffiths and Wasser (2019) introduce data on all secessionist movements between 1900 and 2006, and on the institutional and extra-institutional methods that secessionists have used from 1946 to 2011. No secessionist movement challenging a contiguous state has won its sovereignty, they show, without using institutional methods, either exclusively or in combination with extra-institutional methods. In short, there is no evidence that violence helps a secessionist movement to gain independence, whereas ‘friends in high places’ appears consistently helpful.

Recognition – even years later – is often not universal, with many states withholding recognition and the aspiring state held in a legal limbo. Looking more closely at current cases of contested recognition, Mirilovic and Siroky (2015, 2017, 2020) emphasize the motives of external states to extend and withhold recognition. They argue that transnational religious ties push external states toward recognition of secessionist states, for ideational reasons and for future alliance formation; whereas domestic religious regulations deter states from extending recognition, for fear of sending the wrong signal to domestic religious minorities. When these factors point in opposite directions, the former dominates in influence. Testing this theory, the authors find supportive evidence from contested recognitions around the world: e.g., Kosovo (2017), Palestine and Israel (2015) and Western Sahara (2020).

All of these analyses, however, are static. Recognition is a dynamic process that evolves over time and entails interactions with great power interests. Using new time series data, Siroky, Popovic and Mirilovic (2021) analyze the timing of recognition, asking why some states extend recognition to unilateral secessions quickly, while others delay it. Whereas previous studies have emphasized great power convergence, this study demonstrates the critical role of great power division in shaping recognition dynamics. Using unique data on Kosovo’s recognition, the authors show that countries in the US sphere of influence – and receiving US military and financial aid – were more likely to recognize Kosovo, whereas countries under Russian influence – receiving arms and aid – tended to delay their recognition of this new state-like entity. The article quantifies this ‘great power effect’ on international recognition and demonstrates its diminishing returns over time as recognition disputes become protracted.

Recognition is a bit of a moving target. As Fabry (2012) argues, there is limited empirical evidence that unilateral secession tends to become internationally legitimate, and in other work, Fabry (2010) suggests that international society has adapted its understanding of recognition over time. This has made the means of attaining recognition through unilateral secession increasingly elusive, with Kosovo being a glaring exception to this general rule of thumb. Similarly, Huddleston (2020) sees recognition in a more fluid, continuous manner that evolves over time. He conceptualizes national sovereignty as a changing and continuous *process*, mirrored in foreign policy decisions short of legal recognition. The study suggests that diplomatic recognition, extant violence, separatist victory and sour relations between third-party countries and incumbent states positively influence the latent sovereignty of separatist groups, whereas concerns that sovereignty will create a precedent negatively influences it. Recognition not only is an outcome that secessionists seek to achieve, but it can also contribute to making disputes more intractable. Shelef and Zeira (2017) demonstrate that the international recognition of statehood by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) influences mass attitudes of groups in conflict toward territorial compromise by simultaneously reducing mass support for concessions on the territorial terms of partition while raising support for partition as a strategy of conflict resolution.

The recognition stage can be fruitfully analyzed from the perspective of the motives that drive states to extend and withhold recognition, along with the means needed to attain international recognition, namely external support by a large number of states. Most self-determination movements never arrive at this phase, and it is noteworthy that most of the motives and many

of the internal means that were important for prior phases are largely irrelevant at this stage, and that new factors take on mounting weight.

Conclusion

Secession is not just an event; it is also a process that can be characterized as a series of stylized stages. In this chapter, we have emphasized four key stages in the 'lifecycle of secession': emergence, consolidation, escalation and recognition. Within each phase, the majority of studies can be analytically classified into two groups: those focused on motives, and those emphasizing the means, for secession. We propose that the field could benefit from more focus on the interplay between these two perspectives and on emphasizing such interactions in pursuit of more accurate predictive models. Our review suggests that the relative importance of motives is greater in the early phases of secession, and that the significance of means increases as the self-determination movement advances through the stages towards recognition and statehood.

Secession continues to represent a key challenge to international peace and security. While most of the literature is understandably focused on *explaining* secession, establishing causality in many of the arguments summarized in this chapter is often difficult, given the complexities of cross-country or cross-group comparisons. More attention to prediction in future research on secession could yield significant benefits. Knowing when, where and which demands for self-determination will emerge, consolidate, turn violent and gain recognition is valuable to both scholars and policymakers. Predictions will be more accurate if we can explore factors that influence how and when SDMs transition from one stage of the lifecycle of secession to another. Identifying the four steps – and organizing the relevant literature along a 'means' and 'motives' typology of variables – is only a first step of course.

The framework that we have introduced and explored briefly in this chapter is focused not only on which means and motives operate during different stages of the lifecycle of secession, but also on how they may interact. In addition to recognizing the existence of these critical interactions, they must also be further theorized and utilized in future research to predict secessionist dynamics and processes. The next crucial step is to assess how these particular motives and means interact to produce collective action at each stage in the lifecycle of secession. We hope that in some small way this framework – based on the interaction of means and motives throughout the lifecycle of secession – contributes not only to organizing the large literature on secession and civil war, but also to the growth of studies emphasizing dynamics, processes and predictions.

Notes

- 1 There is a large normative and philosophical literature on the moral justification for secession, on philosophical grounds and in terms of international law, that we do not directly engage with in this study. See, for example, Beran (1984) and Buchanan (2004).
- 2 At the time of this speech, 11 of 13 states had already ratified the Secession Ordinances of 13 Confederate States.
- 3 Estimates for deaths during the American Civil War (less often called the War between the States, or the War of Northern Aggression) range, but most estimates are above 620,000, which is also roughly the estimate for American battle-deaths in all other wars together: World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican–American War, the Iraq–Afghanistan War, the Spanish–American War, the Gulf War.
- 4 In their macro-historical analysis of patterns of state violence in the last 200 years, Wimmer and Min (2006) show that the risk of war was higher around periods of imperial expansion and dissolution and that, following the formation of new states, the risk of revolutionary war in those states was high. Since 1945, the majority of cases of violent ethnic conflict involves demands for regional autonomy, self-determination or secession Cederman, Wimmer and Min (2010); Sambanis and Zinn (2004).

- 5 Deceiving because greed is, in fact, also a grievance, e.g., when a rich region seeks secession because it does not wish to share its wealth; and, moreover, because both grievance and greed are motives, thus the typology entirely leaves out the key components related to the means for rebellion – e.g., resource mobilization and political opportunities.
- 6 While we focus in this chapter on applying this framework to secession, we believe that it also would represent an improvement for the study of civil war in general.
- 7 Also see Fazal and Griffiths (2014), which suggests that normative, security and economic changes in the international system have made secessionism more likely, since these changes have increased the benefits of independence more than its costs.
- 8 Horowitz defines backward and advanced (1981: 170) as follows:

An advanced group is one that has benefited from opportunities in education and nonagricultural employment. Typically, it is represented above the mean in number of secondary-school and university graduates; in bureaucratic, commercial, and professional employment; and in per capita income. Certain stereotypes are commonly associated with these attributes. Advanced groups are generally regarded by themselves and others as highly motivated, diligent, intelligent, and dynamic. . . . Backward groups, less favorably situated on the average in terms of educational attainment, high-salaried employment, and per capita income, tend to be stereotyped as indolent, ignorant, and not disposed to achievement.

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