

The United States, Secessionist Movements, and Stability*

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Abstract: This paper explores an enduring struggle in American foreign policy between principles of international stability and secessionist self-determination. At the dawn of the 21st century, secessionist conflicts remain a challenge to the United States and to the international community. Recent studies indicate that claims for secession are now proliferating. In this context, this research attempts to explain the behavior of the American superpower toward these conflicts and to understand the variation of its policy toward it. Why, for instance, did the United States extend recognition to Croatia, Eritrea, and East Timor, but not to Abkhazia, Bougainville, or Somaliland?

This paper argues that the United States is a stability-seeking power. Its focused response to secessionist crises is to maximize regional stability, which I identify as the US's main interest. I argue that as long as stability is maintained, the United States supports states' territorial integrity and categorically opposes secession. However, the model predicts that the United States will revise its position if a central state is not opened to negotiation with secessionists, nor able to maintain external stability. In this case, the US costs and benefits calculation will radically change. The United States will conclude that the central state has no longer the capability to resolve the crisis and is the main obstacle to regional stability. As a result, the US will move forward to recognize secessionists if they can give clear guarantees of stability in return.

INTRODUCTION

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This paper constitutes the first step of a larger research project on US foreign policy toward secessionist conflicts. It introduces the general puzzle of the research, reviews the literature on the topic, and generates a theoretical proposition, which attempts to explain the variation of the American behavior toward secession since the end of the Cold War. The project aims to contribute to the literature and debate on US foreign policy regarding the issue of ethnic and secessionist self-determination, which is one of the main international matters that the United States will continue to confront in the 21st century.

The Research Puzzle

Although secession is not a new phenomenon, the end of the Cold War has greatly favored its expansion.¹ While some secessionist movements took place in East and Central Europe throughout the 1990s, others (re)emerged in other regional environments such as in Africa and Asia. Facing the increasing number of secessionist claims in the post-Cold War, the United States reacted in a contradictory manner by recognizing some cases of secession but not others. Why is this so? Why, for instance, did the US recognize Bosnia, Eritrea, and East Timor, but not Abkhazia, Kosovo, or Somaliland? How can we explain this policy variation? Can the inconsistency of the US response be explained by the legitimacy of each case? By the regional and the international environment of secessionist movements? By the lobbying of US domestic groups? This raises an important theoretical puzzle in the field of US foreign policy, and this project is aiming to generate a theoretical model that accounts for this variation.

This study also addresses the related question of the evolution of the American attitude toward secessionist self-determination in the post-Cold War. More than ten years have passed since the disintegration of Yugoslavia. During the last decade, the United States dealt with several secessionist movements including the recent case of East Timor that became officially independent in 2002. Did the US political response to these movements remain consistent throughout the years, or was it the result of successive ad hoc policies? In other words, did American behavior reflect a coherent strategy toward secession? This research will also attempt to answer these questions.

As it will be demonstrated, domestic arguments that attempt to explain American policy toward secessionist self-determination are overemphasized and do not accurately account for the US's behavior. Current systemic theories do not provide better explanations for this puzzle. For instance, neorealist and neoliberal models of third state intervention in secessionist conflicts are

¹ Secession is defined as: "the formal withdrawal from a central political authority by a member unit or units on the basis of a claim to independent sovereign status" (Wood, 1981: 110).

unconvincing when applied to the case of the United States. Consequently, this project proposes a new systemic theory of US foreign policy, which provides an accurate and parsimonious explanation of the question under investigation.

I argue that the United States is a stability-seeking power. Its response to secessionist crises has aimed to maximize regional stability, which is the US's paramount interest toward this type of conflict. Thus, the American government has a bias toward state unity. However, this model argues that, under specific circumstances, the United States will recognize secession because it will bring greater stability to a region. I maintain that the US will grant recognition to a secessionist group if the host state demonstrates inability or unwillingness to restore stability, while secessionists offer clear guarantees of stability.² But before delineating my 'rational stability argument', I explain why this research is important, and I review the literature on state intervention in secessionist conflict.

Why the United States?

Achieving international recognition is one of the most important aspects of secession. Many analysts have argued that diplomatic recognition is critical to secessionist groups since it often draws the line between successful and failed cases of secession (Saideman, 2002; Young, 1994; Heraclides, 1991; Horowitz, 1985).³ Without external recognition, unilateral secession has almost no value on the international scene. It is also important to mention that foreign support or acts of recognition do not all carry the same political weight. An act of recognition given by a major power has a greater impact on the process of secession than recognition granted by a weaker state. Power states have the political leverage to make secession a *fait accompli*. Their intervention in favor of secessionists can significantly increase the credibility of secession, regardless of the qualitative value and merits of the case. This explains, for instance, why Biafra failed to secede from Nigeria in the late 1960s, or Kosovo from Yugoslavia in the beginning of the 1990s. They were recognized by foreign states, but failed to obtain recognition from any major power states.⁴

Within that context, it is crucial to understand American foreign policy towards secessionist conflicts since the United States is the most powerful state of the current international system. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has become the sole remaining

² The 'host state' refers to the sovereign state struggling against secession.

³ According to Alexis Heraclides, international recognition is crucial for secessionists because "ultimately, it is numerous recognitions that will transform a secessionist entity (a unilaterally-declared state contravening the strict self-determination principle) into a state" (Heraclides, 1991: 49).

superpower.⁵ Last years' events have demonstrated that there is no sphere of influence where the American power does not reach, nor is there any serious deterrence against US actions (Kagan, 2003; Mastanduno, 1999). Moreover, it has to be remembered that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States was the major architect of international institutions that facilitated international trade and commerce (GATT, IMF, World Bank, WTO), as well as political cooperation between states (UN, NATO, OAS, etc.). Despite a relative economic decline in the 1970s and 1980s (Keohane, 1984), the United States today remains the hegemonic power that guarantees the durability of the post-1945 liberal international system. American ascendancy over international institutions as well as its economical and military domination makes the US an important actor in matters of international recognition of secession. Secessionist groups can secede without an American blessing. I argue, however, that these groups will not be able to function normally in the interstate system without US recognition (e.g. Northern Cyprus and Western Sahara).

Furthermore, data shows that since 1945, the United States has intervened in intrastate conflicts more often than any other major powers (Regan, 1996). Regan points out that among the 76 cases of intervention in intrastate conflicts carried out by a major power between 1945 and 1994, the United States accounted for 46 percent of these interventions (Regan, 1996: 345).⁶ Regan's analysis is a clear indication that the US is the most important intervener in internal conflicts and his finding reinforces my argument from a quantitative point of view.⁷ Thus, for reasons mentioned above, I assert that it is crucial for scholars and policymakers to understand the motives behind the American response to secessionist crises. To make it clear, I recall the three main research questions of the project:

- 1) Why does the United States recognize certain cases of secession but not others?
- 2) How did the US attitude toward secession evolve in the post-Cold War?

⁴ Biafra was recognized by Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Zambia (Saideman, 2001: 74-85). Kosovo was recognized by Albania within days following its declaration of independence.

⁵ The US role of ideological competitor during the Cold War has been replaced by one of international policeman as the Gulf War (1991), the restoration of democracy in Haiti (1994), the NATO bombing in Bosnia and Yugoslavia (1995 and 1999), the war on terror in Afghanistan (2001-02) and more recently in Iraq, have shown.

⁶ For the same period of time, the Soviet Union (Russia after 1991) only accounted for 21% of these interventions, France for 13%, Britain for 12%, and China for 8%.

⁷ I oppose Carment and James (1996) notion of domestic constraint. According to their argument, the more a state is multicultural and democratic, the more its decision-makers face constraints and the harder it is to intervene. Evidence indicates that the United States, which is a democratic and multicultural state, intervened more frequently than any other major powers in internal conflicts.

- 3) Did the Americans develop a coherent foreign policy or a grand strategy for dealing with secession?

Why Should We Bother?

Why is this inquiry important? I consider that the resolution of this theoretical problem is pressing since separatist movements constitute, at the dawn of the 21st century, an enduring challenge to the lone American superpower as well as to the international community (Callahan, 2002). Each year, more than three new states face secessionist demands (Barry, 2003). This indicates that secessionist movements proliferate. These movements constitute a great source of instability that can compromise international security (civil wars, ethnic conflicts, etc.). As empirical evidence indicates, secession is mainly responsible for international geopolitical changes. It is often the main cause of states' creation and disintegration. Therefore, it is an important security concern since it has the potential to alter the international order by creating fluctuations in the distribution of states' power. As the most powerful state in the current international system, the US has, therefore, no choice but to consider secession as a central concern. David Callahan is right when he maintains that "without question, ethnic conflict has emerged as a greater problem for US policy makers than ever before" (Callahan, 1997: 10).

At this moment, there are several secessionist movements that are seeking independence in the different regions of the world—Aceh, Chechnya, Dniester, Turkish Kurdistan, Southern Sudan. By understanding the circumstances under which the United States recognizes secessionist entities, as well as how its attitude towards secession has evolved in the post-Cold War, we will be better equipped to explain its policy and to predict its response towards future secessionist attempts. The research will provide interesting insights as to how the United States would respond to the secession of Montenegro, to the break of Aceh and Papua (Irian Jaya) from Indonesia, or how the US policy toward Abkhazia or South Ossetia—which already seceded from Georgia—is likely to evolve in the near future.

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE?

In recent years, scholars devoted their attention to the international dimension of ethnic conflicts for two main reasons. First, the resurgence of ethnic tensions and the dissolution of multinational states (Czechoslovakia, USSR and Yugoslavia) have produced international changes that generated a great deal of interest among the academic community. Second, and more importantly, after identifying these changes, scholars found that the interconnection between ethnic conflicts

and international relations was lacking a theoretical framework (Carment, 1993).⁸ This lacuna pressed analysts to search for a better understanding of this neglected dimension of international relations by blurring the academic boundaries between the study of international relations and the study of comparative politics.

One of the central issues that has puzzled scholars has been to find accurate factors that explain third party intervention in ethnic and secessionist conflicts. Several competing arguments were generated to explain this research problem. I propose to evaluate whether these arguments are helpful to explaining the American behavior towards secession. I first review the literature on the topic and then appraise the contribution of each approach to the resolution of my theoretical problem.

Competing Arguments

Competing explanations can be divided into two groups: systemic and domestic arguments. The former category assumes that the international environment is the central determinant explaining third state intervention. As for the latter, it asserts that the third state's internal politics best explain motives of intervention, and that domestic groups within the state have the greatest impact on foreign policy decision-making. In short, some arguments focus on the international dynamic, while others concentrate on internal political processes of the state. I first review the arguments formulated by neorealists and neoliberals according to which third state intervention is based on systemic determinants and I will then proceed to examine the explanations of domestic politics.

Security and Power

Neorealists argue that security and power are states' central determinant of interstate interaction (Waltz, 1979; Morgenthau, 1948), and that states follow the same rationale when deciding whether to intervene in internal conflicts (Bienen, 1995; Bull, 1984; Morgenthau, 1967). In recent years, debates among realists have brought out two competing versions of realism known as defensive and offensive realism (Walt, 2002; Zakaria, 1992). The defensive version maintains, among other things, that international anarchy makes states anxious about their security and leads them to balance power and threat in order to weaken hegemonic states (Van Evera, 1999; Snyder, 1991; Walt, 1987). Offensive realists believe, on the contrary, that security can only be partially assured because states cannot directly measure the intentions of others. As a

⁸ Little (1975) and Rosenau (1964) have made similar remarks about the interrelationship between civil war and international politics.

result, states would rather aggressively compete to maximize their power in order to protect themselves (Labs, 1997; Mearsheimer, 1994-95).

However, defensive and offensive realists have not expanded their theoretical contributions to include the international relations connected to secession. They have never proceeded to the scientific measurement of their assumptions by demonstrating empirically that security and power are critical motives explaining third state foreign policy regarding secessionist conflicts. Saideman (2002, 2001) is one of the few scholars who extended the defensive realist rationale to secession. By applying Stephen Walt's balance of threat argument to secessionist conflicts, he evaluates whether security considerations drive states to support secessionist movements abroad to diminish hegemonic powers. His objective is to measure whether or not secessionist groups within strong states receive more support than those in weaker states (Saideman, 2001: 18). Saideman demonstrates that this argument is weakly supported by empirical evidence, and, therefore, that the logic of the balance of threat is not the driving force behind state intervention in secessionist conflicts.⁹ Alexis Heraclides (1990) also illustrates that security concerns fail to explain third party intervention. His analysis suggests that during the Cold War superpowers did not balance their power by supporting opposing sides in secessionist conflicts in order to increase their security (Heraclides, 1990: 375).¹⁰ On the contrary, the United States and the Soviet Union tried to avoid antagonistic policies on these issues.

Furthermore, I maintain that the balance of threat is not a credible argument to explain US behavior towards secessionist movements. Did the United States recognize Chechnya and Tibet in order to sap the strength of Russia or China? The answer is no. In fact, we can assume that the US support to major powers' secessionist movements would be likely to produce retaliation against the US instead of producing greater security. For all of the above reasons, I regard the security assumption as a weak proposition that is not supported by empirical evidence.

Offensive realism leads to a different argument. By focusing on power maximization rather than on security, it assumes that strong states like the United States are tempted to support secessionist groups in weaker states to increase their relative power in geo-strategic areas. This argument maintains that weak states cannot effectively retaliate against strong interveners. The cost of supporting secessionists is therefore inconsequential to hegemonic powers (Carment, James, Rowlands, 1997; Bull, 1984). Saideman (2002) once again does not find convincing

⁹ Saideman analyzes three secessionist crises (the Congo, Nigeria, and Yugoslavia) from which he compiled a total of 43 cases of third party intervention. His study shows that the balance of threat argument was only right in explaining 14 of these interventions (Saideman, 2001).

¹⁰ Heraclides focuses his analysis on the following secessionist movements : Katanga, Biafra, the Southern Sudan, Bangladesh, Iraqi Kurdistan, Eritrea, and the Moro region of the Philippines.

evidence to support the offensive version of realism. As for the specific case of the United States, one could argue that American decision-makers will avoid recognizing secession in weaker states because it would be likely to produce secessionist diffusion. Therefore, the maximization of power argument is not convincing enough to be retained.

In sum, scholars found insufficient evidence to support either realist arguments. When applied to the US case, I argue that assumptions about the balance of threat and power maximization would lead to effects counter-productive to the interest of US foreign policy. Therefore, I choose to reject these arguments.

Vulnerability and Norms

Neoliberals argue that a state's own vulnerability to internal ethnic turmoil inhibits it from supporting foreign secessionist movements. This proposition, known as the vulnerability argument, was first applied to the African regional context (Herbst, 1989; Jackson and Rosberg, 1982; Cervenka, 1969). According to this claim, vulnerability explains why states embrace international norms of cooperation such as the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states.¹¹ Neoliberals assert that the common vulnerability of African states is a strong incentive for cooperation because defection in this case would be likely to result in a dangerous domino effect leading to the infinite redrawing of African borders. As a result, neoliberals argue that explains why states embrace international norms of cooperation such as the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states. Although straightforward and parsimonious, this argument was recently proved false. Heraclides (1990) demonstrates that multiethnic states (especially those vulnerable to separatism) are not less likely to support secessionists than homogenous states. Saideman (2001) also shows that the vulnerability proposition is a common assumption that is weakly supported empirically. His study points out that vulnerable third states (including African states) are not deterred from supporting secessionist groups elsewhere.¹² He concludes that international norms of cooperation among vulnerable states do not account for foreign policy decision-making.

Furthermore, I assert that the vulnerability argument is not appropriate to the case of the United States. The multicultural composition of the US and its emphasis on civic and

¹¹ Cervenka argues that "since many are vulnerable to external incitement for secession it was obvious to most of the O.A.U. Members that a reciprocal respect for boundaries, and abstention from demands for their immediate revision, would be to their general advantage. In order to survive, weak African governments had to be assured of the recognition and respect for their sovereignty by neighboring states, as well as any other states in a position to undermine their authority and control" (1969: 232-33).

constitutional nationalism makes it resistant to secessionist claims. Moreover, the indivisibility of the US republic, which resulted from the 19th century Civil War, is a constitutional principle that has been an integral part of the American political culture since then. Obviously, that does not mean that the United States is totally invulnerable to secession. Texas, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, for example, have a long history of separatist claims. Latin-Americans are also increasingly powerful in the South-West States and may eventually develop separatist aspirations. But overall, we can argue that the United States has a lower level of vulnerability to secessionism compared to other Western States such as Canada, the United Kingdom, or France. Thus, in addition to being empirically refuted by scholars, seeing the US attitude toward secessionist movements in terms of its own vulnerability to secession is a counter-intuitive argument.

Neoliberal institutionalists also assume that international regimes inhibit states from unilateral intervention in intrastate conflicts. They predict that states only intervene in intrastate conflicts once the international community agrees to do so along a defined set of rules in order to enforce peace and security in the targeted state (Carment, James, and Rowlands, 1997). This argument asserts that states do not intervene unilaterally in internal conflicts out of self-interest. Rather, third states choose to cooperate with the consent of international institutions, and then intervene if a multilateral agreement is reached. Because international norms do not legitimize unilateral actions (understood as defection), a multilateral agreement is the *sine qua non* for intervention.

This argument is different from the vulnerability proposition since it presumes that international regime is the central motive that inhibit states from intervening in intrastate conflicts. However, the expectation of both arguments is basically the same since they both assert that states follow international norms of non-intervention. It is interesting to note that by refuting the vulnerability argument, analysts have also demonstrated that norms of cooperation do not really inhibit states from supporting secession (Saideman, 2001, 1997; Heraclides, 1990). American foreign interventions are good examples demonstrating that norms do not have a strong impact on states' foreign policy. Indeed, the US superpower departed on several occasions from the noninterventionist norm. It intervened in Haiti, Cambodia, and Yugoslavia for security and humanitarian reasons. The US war on Iraq in 2003, and to a lesser extent the war on Serbia in 1999, also demonstrate that multilateral agreements are not a necessary condition for US interventions in the internal affairs of other states. Moreover, although the United States' attitude towards secession conformed to the normative regime against secession during the Cold War,

¹² Saideman analyzes 30 cases of highly vulnerable third states, which intervened in three secessionist crises: the Congo, Nigeria, and the Yugoslav conflict. His work demonstrates that among the 30 vulnerable states, at least 16 of

facts indicate that the end of the bipolar era strongly reduced the impact of anti-secessionist norms on US behavior.¹³ In sum, the norm argument appears unconvincing as an explanation for my inquiry.

Are Integrated Models the Solution?

Lately, scholars have attempted to bring together competing explanations to better account for third state intervention. Some argue that no single paradigm can explain third party intervention because the world is not “black-and-white” (Regan, 1998: 764). The solution, they assert, is to combine neorealist and neoliberal assumptions into integrated models of foreign policy by balancing theories about security and power with those on cooperation and interdependence between states. Carment, James and Rowlands (1997), for instance, develop such an equilibrium model to explain third party intervention in ethnic conflicts. Their model evaluates the extent to which third states are willing to give up cooperation with host states in order to support ethnic groups. This is praiseworthy and imaginative, but the problem with this endeavor is that it generates complex theories that do not well explain the research problem. By trying to provide exhaustive accounts of the whole story behind third party intervention, it ends up explaining little and creates more confusion.

Other scholars have focused their attention on domestic politics to explain third states’ foreign policy toward ethnic and secessionist conflicts. They assume that decision-makers are rational actors who try to stay in power by maintaining domestic support. Based on this assumption, scholars developed two credible arguments which examine the topic through the lens of business interests and ethnic politics

Business Interests

According to David Gibbs (1991), American private business interests strongly affect U.S policy towards secessionist conflicts. Gibbs argues that politicians make policies that are in

them supported secessionist movements instead of central governments (Saideman, 2001: 65, 98, and 147).

¹³ The US recognition of secessionist entities in the post-Cold War was a clear departure from the post-1945 normative regime against secession. Evidence shows that during the Cold War the United States was systematically opposed to secession (e.g. Biafra, Bangladesh, Katanga, Southern Sudan, etc.) and strongly supported host states. During this entire period, the US attitude towards secession was to conform to the normative regime against secession which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. This regime was based on three international norms: 1) only peoples under colonial rule have the right to declare independence by claiming self-determination; 2) only self-determined entities (i.e. evolving under colonial rule) can be recognized as sovereign states; and 3) the noninterventionist norm forbids states from interfering in the internal affairs of other states. The American recognition of Bangladesh was the exception that proved the rule. The US extended recognition to Bangladesh in 1972 because India and the Soviet Union made secession a *fait accompli*. For more on the anti-secessionist regime see Alexis Heraclides (1991).

the interest of corporations with which they share strong ties. As he mentions: “politicians and business people act rationally to further their respective self-interests, and such rational behavior influences the conduct of foreign policy” (Gibbs, 1991: 33). Gibbs’s ‘Business Conflict Model’ assumes that US economic groups are divided according to different interests, and compete to maximize these interests. As a result, the US government is frequently torn between conflicting US foreign economic interests when making policies. Gibbs argues, however, that at the end of the day, the private economic connections of US decision-makers are strongly reflected in the American foreign policy towards secession. Gibbs tests his argument using the 1960 Congo crisis. He shows that some US economic groups favored the secession of Katanga from the Congo because they were expecting to replace Belgian industries in the seceding province, while other business groups opposed secession because they were tied to Belgium and therefore their interests lay in a united Congo. Gibbs’s analysis also demonstrates that US foreign policy towards the Congo fluctuated from the Eisenhower to the Kennedy administration because each government was tied to different business interests.

The business interest argument is interesting. However, Gibbs’s analysis only focuses on the Congo case, which greatly limits the validity and robustness of his model.¹⁴ Despite this methodological weakness, he argues that the argument can also apply to other situations with even more relevance because US businesses had low interests in the Congo compared to other regions. I counter argue that secessionist attempts often arise in developing countries (e.g. Eritrea, East Timor, Somaliland) where the US has little economic interests, contrary to the case of the Congo, which had enormous reserves of diamonds, gold, and silver (Gibbs, 1991: 84). Therefore, I doubt that the business interests argument effectively accounts for US foreign policy variation in other cases. Considering that secession can create disruptive effects, it is far from obvious that US business groups could benefit from secession. Think about Bosnia or East Timor, for example, where ethnic tensions led to political and economic chaos. One could rather argue that US business groups always favor stability and secure investments to any secessionist changes, whatever be their interests in the host state. Therefore, I believe that the case of the Congo was the exception rather than the rule. Back in 1960, the Congo was a freshly born state with a strong level of economic dependency on Belgium. It was also marked by a strong degree of polarization between neocolonial economic interests.

Although I doubt that Gibbs’s business interest argument may account for US policy variation, I believe that this proposition needs more investigation before being refuted. After all, it is a common assumption to assume that US economic interest is the driving force behind its

foreign policy, and that the American response to secessionist crises varies on the basis of its economic preferences. Therefore, I propose to challenge this argument by testing it using other empirical cases.

Ethnic Politics

Ethnic politics has been increasingly regarded as a central determinant of third state intervention in ethnic conflicts (Saideman, 2001, 1997; Carment and James, 1996). Saideman (1997) argues for instance that states support the side of an ethnic conflict that shares ethnic ties with leaders' constituents. He asserts that "ethnic politics serves as a critical dynamic compelling some politicians to support secession elsewhere while constraining others" (Saideman, 1997: 725-26). His work clearly demonstrates that there is a strong relationship between ethnic ties and third state foreign policy toward secessionist crises.¹⁵ However, despite the persuasiveness of the ethnic ties argument, it falls short in predicting US foreign policy. As Saideman himself notes, the United States deviates from the ethnic ties explanation and, therefore, does not conform to the argument (Saideman, 2001: 208-09). He explains the anomaly of this situation by arguing that low US ethnic competition could potentially account for the wrong prediction.

Perhaps we could also argue that the US multicultural composition transforms ethnic groups into antagonist forces that cancel each others' efforts to influence American decision-makers. One could also assert that US leaders do not pay much attention to ethnic consideration because it is only beneficial to a small portion of the US electorate at the time.

Policy analysts have also focused their attention on ethnic politics to argue that US-based diasporas strongly affect American foreign policy toward their homelands. They maintain that US ethnic groups are now a major determinant of American foreign policy (Ambrosio, 2002; Shain and Cofman Wittes, 2002; Deconde, 1992). Some even questioned whether the US government still promote national interest or if it has been undermined by diaspora's interests (Shain, 1995). This is not a new issue. Glazer and Moynihan, for example, were arguing in the 1970s that ethnic influence was "the single most important determinant of American foreign policy" (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975: 23-24). More recently, Shain (1999, 1994-95) asserted, among other things, that some ethnic groups have been able to pressure US leaders to adopt supportive policies towards national self-determination movements. To illustrate his argument, Shain gave the example of

¹⁴ Gibbs is aware of this problem and raises it on page 202.

¹⁵ Saideman studies three cases: the Congo, Nigeria, and Yugoslavia. His work shows that where leaders' constituents share ethnic ties with secessionists, they will support secession in 21 cases out of 22. But when leaders' constituents have ethnic ties with the host state, third state leaders' will rather support the central government in 15 out of 17 cases.

Croat-Americans who led an active and successful campaign for the American recognition of Croatia in 1991-92.

This whole argument about ethnic diasporas was studied in several policy oriented works. However, it has not been systematically evaluated by social scientific inquiries. In some cases, analysts seem to raise examples that well support their assumptions but never perform scientific work to test their argument. In fact, evidence show that few ethnic groups are well organized in the United States with the exception of those of Greek, Jewish, and Irish descent as well as Cuban-Americans (Ambrosio, 2002). Most of the groups are small associations that are not powerful enough to impact US foreign policy. Most of them have little money, little political influence, and little or simply no access to the government. I am not arguing here that ethnic lobbies are not important political actors in the United States. I maintain, however, that their impact on the formulation of American policy toward secession must be compared to other factors. Since no scientific work has been conducted in the United States to verify this assumption, my research proposes to systematically measure the accuracy of this argument.

Discussion

There is a rich body of literature on third state's motives for intervention. The literature review examines the various arguments generated on this topic and also shows that my research question fits into broader questions of interest to IR specialists. This review provides important insights into why states might decide to support secessionists and under what circumstances they may be inhibited from doing so. However, I maintain that most of the arguments are not convincing enough to explain US behavior vis-à-vis secessionist conflicts. Scholars who developed systemic models are mainly interested in generating large scale IR theories of third party intervention rather than foreign policy arguments adapted to particular states. As for domestic models, they focus on US foreign policy, but their explanatory power is exaggerated by their proponents.

Moreover, the literature review indicates that most of the work deals with third state support to ethnic and secessionist groups rather than with third state recognition of secession, which is different. There is a difference, for example, between third party ideological encouragement to secession and the extension of politico-diplomatic recognition to a secessionist group. A state that supports and encourages a secessionist group does not necessarily want to grant it formal recognition. In recent years, international support to secessionist groups has been relatively frequent and expressed in different ways. The intensity of support has also greatly varied from simple encouragement to full-scale military intervention (Heraclides, 1991). Diplomatic recognition of statehood was, however, quite rare since 1945 (Carment, 1994: 563).

Formal recognition of secession is the ultimate level of third state intervention in intrastate conflicts by the fact that it often leads to state creation and dissolution. As a result, because of the difference between simple support and formal recognition of secession, I argue that it would be wrong to conclude that factors explaining third state intervention in ethnic conflicts are logically the same as those explaining diplomatic recognition. The literature on third party intervention in ethnic conflicts has therefore limitation in explaining international recognition and can only partially explain my research question. In sum, I argue that a new theoretical model focusing on American foreign policy toward secession in the post-Cold War is needed for the following reasons:

- A. Domestic arguments concerning US foreign policy toward secession are overstated.
- B. Systemic models (neorealist and neoliberal) of third states' intervention are unconvincing and do not account for the US response to secession.
- C. Scholars have focused their attention on third states' support to secessionist groups rather than on third states' recognition of secession, which is different.
- D. Scholars have neglected the study of major powers' foreign policy towards secessionism, which is a crucial aspect of the international dimension of secession.
- E. The superpower status of the United States makes it a very important third state in secessionist conflicts.
- F. Secessionist movements remain an enduring challenge to the international stability at the dawn of the 21st century. These movements are actually proliferating.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES:

Stability and American Foreign Policy

In an attempt to explain the US foreign policy variation towards secession in the post-Cold War, I develop an alternative argument: the Rational Stability Model. This argument asserts that the maintenance—or restoration—of regional stability is the paramount interest of the United States when dealing with foreign secessionist crises.¹⁶ To pursue this goal, the model argues that the United States will support host states as long as they will offer the best option to restore stability. However, if host states become disruptive agents and major obstacles to regional stability, the argument predicts that the United States will envisage diplomatic recognition of secession as a

credible alternative for the restoration of stability. However, and this is consistent with the first part of the argument, secessionists will have to demonstrate their ability to maintain external as well as internal stability before being recognized by the United States. The capability of secessionists' self-rule will be decisive since the US will not be interested in supporting a new state that is likely to reproduce the instability problem of the predecessor state. But before presenting the argument in detail, it is important first to delineate assumptions on which the model is built.

The rational stability argument is built on the assumption that rational choices determine US foreign policy on secessionism. It first assumes that American foreign policy is the result of choices made by a unitary actor (the presidency). The argument recognizes that US foreign policy involves a complex political process within which several actors are competing. It also acknowledges that the American government is one of "separated institutions sharing powers" (Neustadt, 1976). However, the power to recognize governments and states is an exclusive presidential prerogative.¹⁷ And when the time comes to make foreign policy decisions, this model assumes that the presidency acts rationally and makes purposive choices. The second assumption is that the presidency seeks to further its subjectively defined goals, which are here identified in terms of regional stability. This argument assumes that the presidency selects on the basis of a costs and benefits calculation, the course of action that will bring the greatest expected stability. The United States foreign policy is therefore motivated by instrumental rationality leading to informed decisions (Morrow, 1994).¹⁸ This assumption does not pretend, however, that the presidency is omniscient or that it has all the relevant information to make enlightened choices. It only assumes that actors are purposive, rational, and pragmatic, but not all-knowing. Third, the model assumes that the US presidency possesses a fixed set of preferences towards secessionist crises, which are ranked in order of priority. These preferences determine US policy choices (Frieden, 1999).¹⁹

¹⁶ By regional stability I mean : peace between sovereign states, maintenance and respect of international borders, and nonintervention in states' internal affairs.

¹⁷ Following the recognition of the Soviet Union by President Roosevelt in 1933, the Supreme Court of the United States stated that the recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the USSR were clearly the competence of the President (Henkin, 1996). Previously, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations ruled in 1897, in connection with the Cuban struggle for independence, that "the executive branch is the sole mouthpiece of the nation in communication with foreign sovereignties... [and] therefore, a Congressional recognition of belligerency or independence would be a nullity" (Berdahl, 1940).

¹⁸ We borrow James Morrow's definition of rationality : "...choosing the best means to gain a predetermined set of ends. It is an evaluation of the consistency of choices and not of the thought process, of implementation of fixed goals and not of the morality of those goals" (Morrow, 1994: 17).

¹⁹ Jeffrey Frieden indicates that "in any given setting, an actor prefers some outcomes to others and pursues a strategy to achieve its most preferred possible outcome" (Frieden, 1999: 41). This is what Frieden means by "a preference" (ibid., 47).

Making the Connection Between Stability and Rationality

Arguing that the US presidency is a rational actor does not say why the United States should care more about stability than about ethnic politics or US business interests. The connection between stability and rationality must therefore be made. As it was mentioned previously, for more than fifty years now, American decision-makers have assured the maintenance of the post-war international order, which provided relative peace and prosperity. With the end of the Cold War, the US international role was maintained—and to a certain extent increased—by the fact that it is now the sole remaining superpower.²⁰ In this context, secession is seen by American decision-makers as a great source of instability that threatens state borders and that can potentially lead to the spread of separatist conflicts (Halperin, Scheffer, and Small, 1992). Scholars have recently found that there are around 5000 ethno-linguistic groups in the world (Gurr, 1993). This fact indicates that separatism has the capability of becoming a great source of international disruption, even if only a small portion of these groups seek separation.

The United States is therefore very reluctant to support secessionism for fear of encouraging other separatist movements that would endanger the management of world peace. As Secretary of State Warren Christopher once mentioned, the world is made of thousands of ethnic minorities and less than two hundred sovereign states. Allowing the right of external self-determination to ethnic minorities would lead to a “permanent turmoil” of the international system (Callahan, 1997: 27). Supporting secessionist groups could also generate greater responsibility for the United States, such as military intervention and economic assistance. It would also necessitate the redefinition of US foreign policy in different regions of the world. As a result, Americans do not address secessionist issues from an objective and neutral point of view, but rather from a pessimistic perspective. The US preference is for the maintenance of large multinational states that can accommodate nationalities and minorities. As Henry Bienen points out, the United States is more concerned “with stability of the state system (...), more concerned about not opening the Pandora’s box of ethnically based demands for new nation-states, than they have been concerned to support self-determination everywhere as a principle” (Bienen, 1995: 160). Here stability clearly has a utilitarian function for the US since it facilitates the management of the world political order, sustains the international economic system, and helps the US to maintain its superpower status. Moreover, stability defined in terms of rationality, allows us to make rigorous foreign policy analyses.

²⁰ The United States currently has more ability than any other states to lead international efforts for peace and security throughout the world (Daalder, 1996).

Some also argue that the historical background of the United States reinforces the US anti-secessionist bias and its concern for stability (Ganguly and Taras, 1998). The American Civil War (1861-65) was a painful experience to the United States and decision-makers do not remember it as being a glorious episode in American history. That can partly explain the US negative appreciation of secession and its bias in favor of state indivisibility.²¹ But then, if the United States is a status quo power that has an anti-secessionist bias, how can we explain that it did support and recognize several secessionist groups in the post-Cold War? What accounts for the US departure from its *a priori* support for stable international borders?

The US Rational Stability Argument: A Two-Step Response

The rational stability model argues that it is in the best interest of the United States that secessionist claims be managed and contained within state borders. However, states' territorial integrity is not always a guarantee of stability and can actually be a serious cause of regional disruption. Therefore, supporting territorial integrity is not always in the best US strategic interest and can actually be counter-productive. The argument maintains that, under certain specific circumstances, the US will choose to recognize secession because it will be the best way to maximize regional stability.

The rational stability argument proceeds in two steps. First, it maintains that the United States will support state unity as long as the central government will maintain external stability by containing the secessionist crisis within its borders (either by negotiation or by force). If the host state is unable to maintain external stability but is opened to negotiation with secessionists and/or to third party mediation, the United States will remain committed to state integrity. The US will then estimate that supporting the central government remains the best way to restore stability. In other words, the expected stability benefits that will procure the unity of the host state, exceed the cost of immediate instability. Therefore, as long as the host state will demonstrate its openness to settle the crisis in order to reestablish regional stability, the US will categorically oppose secession and support state unity. However, the model predicts that the United States will revise its position if the host state is not opened to negotiations and/or foreign mediation, nor able to maintain external stability. In this case, the US costs and benefits calculation will radically change. The United States will conclude that the host state has no longer the capability to resolve the crisis and is actually the main obstacle to stability. As a result, American decision-makers will

²¹ The former US ambassador to Canada, James Blanchard, mentions in his memoir: "the vast majority of Americans, inside and outside the government, have absolutely no sympathy or patience for the notion of secession. That's rooted, reasonably or not, in our own Civil War..." (Blanchard, 1998: 67).

envisage the recognition of secession as a likely alternative to bring back stability and peace in the concerned region. Here are the external and internal indicators used to measure the host state's failure to maintain stability:

Indicators of Central State's External Instability:

- The secessionist crisis produces refugee flows;
- The crisis escalates into a political dispute between the central state and foreign states (conflict escalation);
- The secessionist crisis violates the sovereignty of contiguous states.

Indicators of Central State's Failure to Negotiate:

- The central government refuses to negotiate with secessionists and exercises military repression;
- The central government rejects third party mediation for the resolution of the crisis;
- The central government collapses and therefore can no longer resolve the crisis.

This leads to the second step of the argument. The rational stability model asserts that before seriously considering politico-diplomatic recognition of secession, the US will want the assurance that the secessionist group is able to maintain external and internal stability. American decision-makers will not be interested in recognizing a new state that is likely to replicate the instability of the predecessor state. If the secessionist group succeeds in showing internal and external stability, the United States will grant recognition, which will produce an absolute improvement in stability. If it is not the case, US recognition will be denied and the status quo will be maintained.²² Here are the indicators of stability of secessionist groups:

Indicators of external stability of the secessionist group:

- Secessionists respect external borders;
- Secessionists demonstrate that no interstate war is likely to occur following recognition.

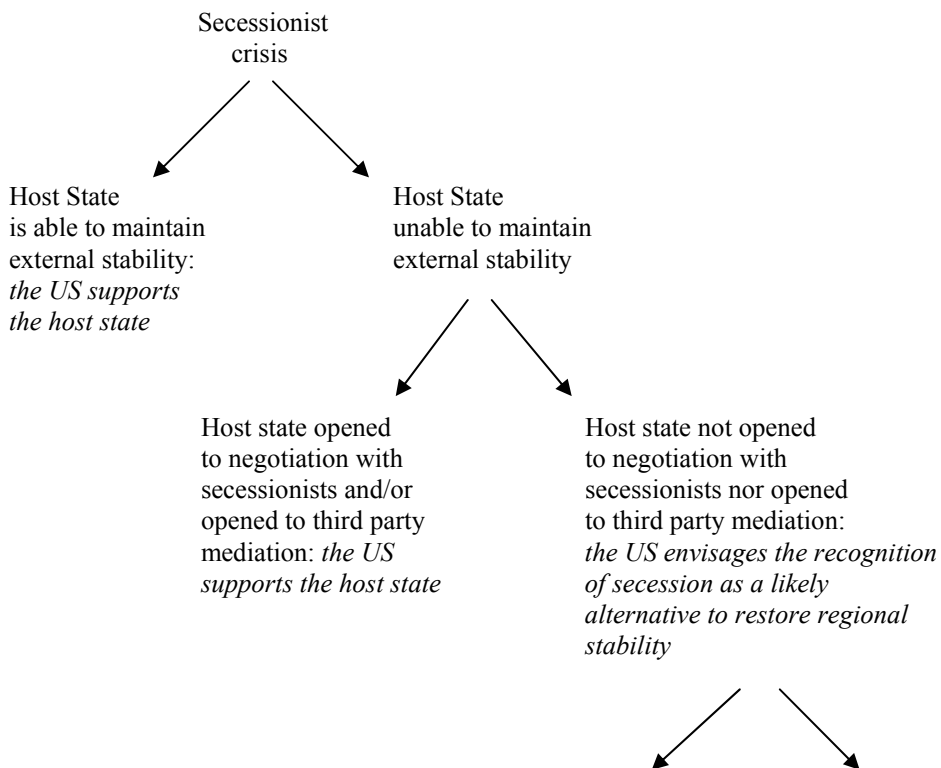
²² However, the political status of Kosovo, established by the Rambouillet agreement and by the 2001 Constitutional Framework, is an interesting international development that arose out of the failure of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and Kosovo to guarantee regional stability. Instead of maintaining the status quo, the UN created a new model of non-Westphalian state sovereignty—Kosovo remains officially part of FRY, but is administered by the UN and Belgrade has no effective power within it. This new kind of “flexible” sovereignty conferred to Kosovo may actually be seen as part of a new generation of responses from the US and the international community to situations where a secessionist group cannot remain part of a host state nor become fully independent because of instability (Doyle, 2004).

Indicators of internal stability of the secessionist group:

- Secessionists agree to hold a democratic referendum on independence;
- The secessionist group has a defined territory within the central state (republic, province, state, etc.);
- Secessionists respect internal borders;
- Secessionists respect human and minority rights.

The model predicts that the US delay of recognition will occur when a secessionist group will partially meet criteria of external and internal stability. Americans will then withhold recognition until secessionists demonstrate sufficient capability to maintain stability. Moreover, it is important to mention that not all empirical cases will chronologically follow the two steps of the argument. Some secessionist cases can clearly demonstrate, right from the beginning of the crisis, that they are able to maintain stability but will not be recognized by the United States because their host state will be able to resolve the conflict.

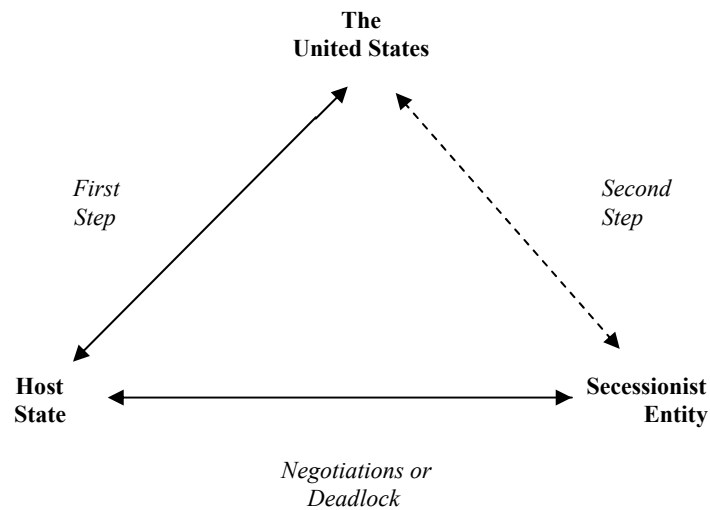
Figure 1: The US Rational Stability Argument



Secessionist group
unable to maintain
external and internal
stability: *the US*
does not recognize
secession (status quo)

Secessionist group
able to maintain
external and internal
stability: *the US*
recognizes secession

Figure 2: The Dynamic of the US Rational Stability Strategy



The rational stability argument clearly defines the United States' preferences towards secessionist conflicts. These preferences—which are ranked in order of priority from the most to the least favored outcome—identify US foreign policy choices that will be made depending on the evolution of the crisis. Preferences are ranked as follows:

US Stability Preferences

1. The host state is able to maintain external stability and negotiates with secessionists and/or opened to third party mediation. (Outcome: Regional stability). Ex.: Canada (Quebec), France (Corsica), Spain (Basque Country).
2. The host state is able to maintain external stability but rejects negotiations with secessionists or third party mediation. (Outcome: Stability but a risk of regional disorder). Ex.: Indonesia (Aceh), Georgia (Abkhazia).
3. The host state is unable to maintain external stability but is opened to negotiation and/or to third party mediation. (Outcome: Instability but the restoration of regional stability remains possible). Ex.: Papua New Guinea (Bougainville).
4. The secessionist group demonstrates ability to maintain external and internal stability. (Outcome: The US extends diplomatic recognition to secession).
* *That will only be the case if the host state clearly represents an obstacle to regional stability.* Ex.: Indonesia (East Timor), Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia).
5. The secessionist group is unable to guarantee external/internal stability and the host state represents a clear obstacle to regional stability. (Outcome: Status quo. The US does not recognize secession). Ex.: Somalia (Somaliland).

Built on rational assumptions and previous deductions regarding US foreign policy behavior towards secessionist crises, the US rational stability argument generates the following testable hypotheses:

Hypotheses

H1: The United States opposes secession if the host state maintains external stability.

H2: The US opposes secession if the host state is opened to negotiation with secessionists and/or to third party mediation.

H3: The US recognizes secession if the secessionist group demonstrates ability to maintain internal and external stability, while the host state does not.

H4: The US opposes secession if the secessionist entity does not demonstrate clear ability to maintain internal and external stability even if the host state likewise lacks ability to maintain stability.

The rational stability model is testable and parsimonious. It could be disproved if one could demonstrate, for instance, that the United States had recognized a secessionist entity, while the host state was still able to maintain external stability or was open to negotiations. It would also be wrong if someone could show that the US extended recognition to a secessionist group that could not maintain stability.

Challenging Domestic Theories

In order to test whether the rational stability argument accurately explains US foreign policy variations toward secession, I propose to compare my model to the *business interests* and *ethnic politics* propositions, which are arguably the most serious counter-arguments. Both of these theories rely on domestic politics to explain US foreign policy. My aim is to demonstrate that the American policy fluctuation toward secessionist crises does not depend on the US domestic political process but rather on the systemic effects of international relations. I select empirical cases of secession that would normally validate the ethnic politics and business interests arguments. For each of these cases, I first test my own rational stability model using these case studies, and then see whether the competing theories do a better job at explaining the research puzzle. This research strategy will hopefully allow me to refute the domestic models.

METHODOLOGY

Case Selection

The rational stability model will be tested using case studies. Since instances of secession are limited, the selection of cases cannot be randomly generated. Therefore, I have selected cases that are significant and accurate for the measurement of my research hypotheses. I proceed to a systematic analysis of pairs of cases picked in different regional contexts for a total of eight cases. Each pair assembles one or two cases of secession that were recognized by the United States, and one or two that were not. Cases are: Slovenia and Croatia compared to Macedonia and Kosovo (Europe); Eritrea to Somaliland (Africa); and East Timor to Bougainville Island (South East Asia). Macedonia is identified as a case of non-recognition because the United States delayed its recognition for a long period of time. Macedonia declared its independence in 1991 but was only recognized by the US in 1993. The delay of recognition is therefore treated as non-recognition. I compare Slovenia and Croatia to Macedonia and Kosovo because these cases evolved in a similar regional context although they had a very different political fate. Slovenia and Croatia are both former Yugoslav republics that were recognized by the US in 1992. However, Macedonia saw its recognition delayed, while Kosovo failed (until now) to secede mainly because it was never recognized by major powers.

As for the African regional context, Eritrea is the only successful case of secession that happened in the post-Cold War. Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia in 1993 after more than 30 years of war. It is one of the most recent cases of secession. As for Somaliland, Eritrea's secessionist neighbor, it attempted to secede from Somalia in 1991 by self proclaiming an independent

Republic of Somaliland. However, contrary to Eritrea, it has never been recognized by the international community. These two cases are, to a certain extent, very similar given that they are next to each other and that they both emerged from collapsing states. Though, they experienced very different outcomes.

Finally, South East Asia is also relevant to US foreign policy analysis because it underscores the inconsistency of the American response to secession. The secession of East Timor from Indonesia was supported by the US in late 1990s, while the Bougainville Island's secession from Papua New Guinea was rejected by Washington.

Figure 3 : Case Studies

Regions	US Response	
	Recognition	Non-Recognition
Europe	Slovenia, Croatia	Macedonia, ²³ Kosovo
Africa	Eritrea	Somaliland
South East Asia	East Timor	Bougainville Island

These cases provide very different dynamics as well as a good representation of the US foreign policy variation toward secession. I am hoping that this selection will increase the generalizability of my model as well as the robustness of the findings. Moreover, by including a variation in my dependent variable, I limit the problem of selection bias. Here, the selection of cases represents the whole range of possibilities on the empirical axis of cases (i.e. recognition vs. non-recognition cases). This selection will allow to properly estimate the strength of the model (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994).

I choose not to include cases of secession of the Soviet Union in the sample since I believe that this issue was related to the end of the Soviet empire more than to secession. I maintain that the US reaction toward the independence of the Soviet republics lay in the Cold War context. As long as the Soviet Union remained, the US did not step forward to recognize the Baltic States, which were the first to secede (Gvosdev, 1995). The United States issued recognition only once Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine agreed to dismantle the USSR in December

²³ Macedonia's recognition was originally delayed and finally recognized by the US in 1993. I treat the period of delay as an instance of non-recognition.

of 1991. I argue that the Soviet disintegration was the last episode of the Cold War. By comparison, the demise of Yugoslavia, which began in 1991 can be seen as one of the first major international events of the post-Cold War, and as a starting point for the analysis of the US foreign policy toward secession in the emerging international order.

CONCLUSION

By creating a rational choice explanation of American foreign policy toward secessionist conflicts, this research is aimed at understanding the variation of the US response to secession in the post-Cold War. In doing so, this project attempts to explain how the American policy toward secessionist conflicts is shaped, and how the US attitude has evolved over years. The study will also shed new light on whether the United States has elaborated a coherent foreign policy strategy toward secession in the post-Cold War, which helped to manage international stability.

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