Chapter 15

Third-party Involvement in Self-determination Conflicts

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I The International Dimension of Self-determination Conflicts

Self-determination or separatist conflicts have implications for international politics in at least two ways. They challenge international norms and they aim to change international borders. Separatism points to the inherent tension between the territorial integrity and sovereignty of states, both granted by the Charter of the United Nations, and the right to self-determination, as enshrined, for example, in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Furthermore, the international community of states is deeply concerned about any attempt to change borders, as it often endangers the stability of a region and may be regarded as a threat to international peace. Self-determination conflicts raise a set of legal, political, economic, and security issues that go far beyond the local struggle between a central government and a separatist movement – they are by no means a purely internal affair.

In terms of actors, self-determination conflicts can also no longer be adequately described as internal or civil wars. In fact, they are highly internationalized. Since the early 1990s, we can observe an increasing number of external actors and the spread of all kinds of cross-border activities. In order to reflect this development, new labels have been coined: “wars of the third kind” (Holsti 1996), “new wars” (Kaldor 1999); or “network wars” (Duffield 2001). They all refer, inter alia, to the fact that these conflicts are characterized by the involvement of a large number of external actors that often affect the level of violence and the strategies of warfare. At least three different types of external actors can be distinguished: allies, spoilers, and third parties.

First, secessionist groups and central governments as the key conflicting parties themselves maintain cross-border contacts with external allies in order to strengthen their political position as well as their military potential. Often, kin states or powerful diaspora communities provide secessionists with military assistance, economic aid, and/or political backing. Examples are Serbia in the case of the Bosnian Serbs, the Albanian diaspora in Western Europe and North
America in the case of Kosovo, or the American-Irish community in the case of Northern Ireland. Sometimes also non-kin actors – such as neighbouring states, great powers, or non-state actors – are willing and able to support one of the warring sides (e.g., Arab sponsorship for the Palestinians, US support for Israel).

Second, due to the armed conflict and the collapse of public order, various external actors are able to cross borders and to exploit the situation for their own purposes and profits without being necessarily invited by any local actor. They have an interest in keeping the conflict alive, insofar as they work as spoilers from outside who have no interest in any kind of settlement. They often link themselves to one of the parties or to fringe groups, most often local warlords, terrorists, or criminals. In some cases, they may even control these local groups. Examples here are trans-national criminal networks that use continuing conflicts for all kinds of illegal activities, such as the smuggling of weapons, drug dealing, or trafficking of women (Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Georgia, Colombia), international terrorists who seek safe havens or financial resources (Georgia, Afghanistan, Philippines, Indonesia, Bosnia), or states or trans-national companies who have major economic interests, in particular in cases of easily accessible natural resources (Angola, Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, or, to a lesser extent, Bougainville).

Third, in many cases external actors engage in order to achieve conflict resolution. Over the past fifteen years, most peace agreements have been brokered and/or have been implemented with the assistance of third parties. Their intervention often proved to be crucial in managing and settling self-determination conflicts. A whole range of actors may function as third parties, notably international organizations or multilateral fora, but also other states, international NGOs, or well-respected individuals (e.g., former statesmen).

This chapter focuses on this third category of international involvement. However, it should be noted that the behaviour of the other two types of external actors is of great importance when it comes to conflict resolution. Thus, third parties will not only have to deal with the local conflicting parties, but also with any external allies or spoilers. The focus is also on secessionist conflicts that have been settled by complex power-sharing regimes and not by the change of international borders. There are basically two reasons why the international community engages in such conflicts. First, obviously, the key parties involved – usually a central government and a secessionist movement – are unable to solve their disputes in a non-violent way and need help in various forms. Second, the international community itself is still very reluctant to accept and recognize self-determination claims and therefore has an interest in preventing secession or the dissolution of states by favouring some kind of internal solution, such as power-sharing arrangements.

As a result, one can observe an increasing number of cases where international actors play a vital role in achieving and maintaining power-sharing structures. By contrast, prominent cases of successful or failed power-sharing of the past, such as Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, South Tyrol, Northern Ireland (1973), Lebanon, Malaysia, or post-Apartheid South Africa are not characterized