Diplomatic Problems of an Autonomous State: 
Romanian Decisions on War and Independence, 1877

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the general problems which the Romanian government faced as an autonomous state under Ottoman suzerainty but Great Power protection. The subject covered also relates to the general difficulties faced by any small state, located in a strategic position, with large neighbors, and the limitations necessarily placed on its freedom of action and its range of choices in foreign policy. The emphasis will be on the months between the summer of 1876 and the fall of 1877.

The Romanian international position was defined in the Treaty of Paris of 1856 and the August convention of 1858. Although in theory under Ottoman suzerainty, that control after 1859 became largely nominal and was expressed chiefly through the payment of a fixed tribute and a number of vexing controls on certain aspects of foreign relations and economic policy. In practice, the Ottoman government had been rendered powerless to enforce any decisions on the principalities through the limits placed on its right of intervention. Article 27 of the Treaty of Paris stated: “If the internal tranquility of the Principalities should be menaced or compromised, the Sublime Porte shall come to an understanding with the other contracting powers in regard to the measures to be taken for maintaining or reestablishing legal order. No armed intervention can take place without previous agreement between those powers.”

Not only was Ottoman intervention thus dependent on the consent of the guaranteeing powers, but in practice the approval of all of the states was considered necessary. Although the principalities were thus protected against Ottoman action, no specific separate provision was made for their defense against an attack from an outside power. However, Article 7 of the Treaty of Paris re-
corded the declaration of the rulers of the Great Powers engaging them "to respect the independence and the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. . ." In April, 1856, Austria, Britain, and France signed a separate agreement reaffirming the guarantee of "the independence and territorial integrity" of the empire and providing that any infraction of the Treaty of Paris would be considered a *casus belli*. As a part of the Ottoman Empire, the principalities thus had some treaty protection against outside aggression.

Although the principalities were thus placed under Ottoman sovereignty and Great Power protection, there was no clear agreement on what either of these terms involved. The Porte regarded the Romanian lands as privileged provinces and an integral part of the Ottoman lands; the rulers of the principalities felt themselves bound only through capitulations signed in past centuries and thus tied loosely to the suzerain power. The privileges and duties of the protectors were also vague. In practice, the Great Powers took it upon themselves to supervise the formation of new governments and at least at first to exercise a control over their actions. The interference of the powers meant that the internal organization of the principalities as well as their international status was determined by treaty and thus, in theory, no changes could be made without the consent of the protectors. Despite the difficulties inherent in the situation, the national movement in the principalities did achieve notable successes. The double election of Alexander Cuza in 1858-59, the administrative and legislative unification of 1862, the *coup d'état* of 1864, and finally the election of a foreign prince in 1866 all involved changes in, or violations of, international agreements. The division among the powers and the impossibility of enforcing contrary decisions in Bucharest made such actions possible.

Until 1870 Romanian interests were forwarded by a very favorable international situation. European attention was absorbed by the great unification movements in Central Europe and Italy; no firm diplomatic combinations or alliance systems existed. Of major importance was the fact that the principalities had a great power supporter—and one which was considered the strongest.

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4. According to the terms of the Treaty of Paris, all of the contracting parties became protecting powers, including the Ottoman Empire. In fact, major contradictions existed between the position of the Porte as the suzerain and as a protector. In most diplomatic correspondence of the time, the term protector, or guarantor, is used to refer to the six European powers, not to the suzerain. This usage will be adopted here.