

## The Mystery of Phantom States

In almost every region of the globe, there is a phantom state hovering like an apparition among the more corporeal members of the international system. Some of their names sound like the warring kingdoms of a fantasy novel: Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno–Karabakh and the Dniester Moldovan Republic. Others, such as Gaza/Palestine, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, or Taiwan, dominate the headlines. These polities look like real countries to their inhabitants, who salute their flags and vote in their elections. Some even field armies, issue visas, and collect taxes. But they are largely invisible to international legal institutions, multilateral organizations, and global trade regimes. The reason is that they lack formal recognition, or what a political scientist would call “external sovereignty.”

Over the last 20 years, the status of the world’s phantom countries has been literally a matter of life and death: stoking wars, fostering crime, keeping weak states weak, presenting a diplomatic conundrum to major powers, and raising the age-old question of what kinds of polities deserve to be legitimate players in a global system of sovereign states. However, serious discussion of these phantoms usually collapses into name-calling. Some unrecognized countries are derided as separatists, terrorist havens, or mafia-run enclaves. Others are praised as the home of freedom-loving citizens seeking liberation from despots. Treatments by judges and international lawyers have usually been more sober, but they too have been most interested in testing the legitimacy of a particular bid for independence by a state-like claimant. Such debates are also good for business. A large Washington-based network of lobbying firms and consultants

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works to help unrecognized governments make their case to the White House, Capitol Hill, think tanks, and defense contractors. One need only visit the website of the Republic of Nagorno–Karabakh or open a holiday card from the Republic of Abkhazia to see how the marketing of a country’s aspirations and grievances depends little on whether it has a seat at the United Nations.

But where do these wraiths come from, and why do they insist on hanging around? If the currency of world politics is mutual recognition—official membership in the club of sovereign nations—why have these non-state states proven to be such durable parts of the international community? The evidence seems to point in an uncomfortable direction.

**The rise of phantom states suggests that formal sovereignty has lost some of its caché.**

While the bedrock of the global order is the ability of sovereign countries to enter into relations with their own kind, the rise of phantom states suggests that formal sovereignty has lost some of its caché. How to balance respecting state sovereignty with the desire to advance other noble principles, such as human rights, is an old debate. It has been at the heart of many of the major regional crises of the last two decades, from Kosovo to Libya to Syria. Yet the real challenge to the sovereignty principle comes not from advocates of what in Davos jargon is now

called “R2P”—the international community’s “responsibility to protect” civilians from their own governments via muscular intervention or forceful peacekeeping. Rather, the challenge to sovereignty comes from the rather successful and deeply self-interested makers of phantom states. In other words, what happens to the foundations of international relations if you can get by just fine—as a president or an average citizen—by living in a country that nobody believes really exists?

### **What Is a State?**

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The long and venerable tradition of theorizing about states has much to say about what they do, but rather little about sorting the real ones from the imaginary. For Thomas Aquinas, states were, among other things, bearers and wielders of legitimacy: a state could do things morally that would be immoral for an individual to manage. In Max Weber’s oft-cited definition, states are those entities that exercise a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. Contemporary political scientists take Weber one step further, focusing less on legitimacy and more on the capacity of leaders and institutions to extract resources and organize their populations.<sup>1</sup>

Phantom statehood challenges these standard views. First, phantom states illustrate the disjuncture between internal and external sovereignty. Somalia has the latter but lacks the former, retaining a UN seat despite having spotty control over the territory it claims as its own. Conversely, states that acquire only minimal external recognition—such as Somaliland (the better-governed part of defunct Somalia) or Nagorno–Karabakh (the ethnic Armenian enclave still formally a part of Azerbaijan)—may become quite adept at building the internal accoutrements of statehood, including the loyalty of their inhabitants. The imprimatur of the international community is no guarantee that internal and external sovereignty necessarily go together.

Second, phantom states call into question the link between external sovereignty and state efficacy. Rather than being transitional entities lying midway between an inchoate state and a fully recognized one, phantom states can remain relatively stable and effective in their own right—even though their very existence may create broader security problems for the region in which they lie.

Third, phantom states do not always follow the standard models of state-building drawn from modern European history or from the experience of European overseas colonialism. Their emergence is due to factors more complicated than the transformation of a former colony into a suddenly independent country.

Over the last two decades, more than two dozen new countries have been born from other states and from collapsing regional orders. Some have easily achieved recognition and international legitimacy. Others have remained *de facto* but not *de jure* and have rarely figured into discussions about independence movements, successful wars of national liberation, state-building, and the international politics of recognition. But what precisely counts as one of these phantom states? We define them as political–administrative entities that satisfy four criteria:

- A functioning state apparatus which exercises *de facto* control over a distinct territory with a population, with the capacity to organize and distribute resources within that territory, including military force;
- An expressed (though not necessarily constant, consistent, or universally shared) interest in independence as evidenced by a formal declaration of independence, credible statements by key political leaders, or pronouncements of other corporate bodies with claims to representativeness;
- The *de facto* government's seeking and acquiring some degree of popular legitimacy, as measured through elections, referenda, or mass rallies in support of notional independence; and

- A situation of contested statehood over the phantom state's place in the international system—that is, rival governmental claims to sovereignty between a phantom and what might be called its “base state,” coupled with the absence of formal recognition by a significant number of recognized countries.

These criteria are meant to distinguish phantom states from cognate phenomena such as warlordism. They are also intended to set off truly functional states from the imagined homelands of romantic nationalists. For example, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)—which seeks to protect the interests of indigenous peoples and unrecognized polities—contains 56 members, ranging from the Vhavenda of northeastern South Africa (an indigenous tribal group with no autonomous status) to Scania (a province of southern Sweden that some political activists claim as the homeland of a distinct Scanian people). Finally, we seek to exclude *de facto* havens which guerrilla groups have carved out of their host states, such as the autonomy Hezbollah enjoys in southern Lebanon. Although the Lebanese state's writ is limited, Hezbollah does not seek to separate from Lebanese territory or even oppose the Lebanese state as such. These criteria are also meant to exclude states that enjoy *de jure* sovereignty, even if they do not truly control their own territory. Thus entities such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Somalia are excluded, even though such “failed states” may no longer satisfy Weberian or other criteria for statehood.

## The Dynamics of Phantom State-Building

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Phantom states are a Goldilocks category in international affairs. They are not too strong, for if they had more leverage they would be recognized members of the international community. Nor are they too weak, for if they had less power they would never have carved out territory to control except by a fluke. Even then, their base state would happily swallow them up as time went on. Since World War II, the odds on long-term success for phantom states have been about even. On one inventory, 23 unrecognized states have emerged since 1945, of which 13 achieved independence or long-term contested sovereignty. The remainders were voluntarily or forcibly reintegrated with the base state.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is precisely these odds that phantom states can use to their advantage. Their emergence and durability are the result of an unstable equilibrium involving the base state, peripheral elites, regional powers, and the international community.

### The Base State

Phantom states initially arise because of the weakness of the base state, typically the direct result of civil war. The phantom state may win a war of secession, as in

the case of Abkhazia and the Dniester Moldovan Republic. But they might also emerge more stealthily. The phantom might secede while the base state is engaged in some other struggle, as in the case of Somaliland.

In either situation, the power balance favors the base state in material terms, while the phantom state retains enough power to stop itself from being overrun. This balance is variable and relative, of course. For Taiwan to survive without domination by China requires far more military capacity than does Somaliland's successful resistance to the encroachment of what remains of Somalia.

For several phantom states, military capacity is simply a sustained or iterated willingness to wage a costly insurgency against a militarily superior foe. Israel has no love for the Hamas regime next door in Gaza, and its military power dwarfs that of the Islamist movement. But the Jewish state has avoided a military reoccupation of the Gaza Strip since its unilateral withdrawal in 2005, fearing a steady toll in casualties. An important part of a phantom state's military power is thus a demonstrated culture supporting, and organization for, insurgency in the event of a hostile occupation.

Geography often aids military power. Territories located far from a national capital, with easy access to enclaves beyond the national borders of the base state, can field guerrilla forces or armies that present a major challenge to the recognized government. Significantly, most phantom states share a border with both the base state and a foreign country. Many have geographic advantages such as mountainous terrain or an extended coastline that make them difficult to subdue militarily.<sup>3</sup> The Nationalist forces that clung to power in Taiwan, for example, would not have survived the Communist armies that conquered mainland China by 1949 were it not for Taiwan's island status.

### **Peripheral Elites**

Local leaders who are peripheral to the politics of the base state are the critical engines of phantom states. On occasion, these leaders may be the heirs of longstanding desires for independence on the part of the regional, ethnic, linguistic, or other group that they claim to represent. More frequently, however, the decision to seek independence comes about in the swirling context of a weakening base state and political rivalries among peripheral elites themselves.

Indeed, *de facto* independence can develop as a by-product of the struggles *within* these communities, perhaps even more frequently than it does from a community's anger at the base state. While Chechens had a long record of resistance to Russian and Soviet rule, for example, a spiral of ethnic outbidding seems to have been the critical feature of Chechnya's bid for independence in 1991, with one or another Chechen faction upping the ante against Russia as a way of outflanking internal rivals. A similar dynamic was at work in the Dniester Moldovan Republic and in Gaza/Palestine, where infighting between Fatah and

Hamas led the latter to openly seize power. At times, this is a cascading dynamic, where a successful independence bid in one state produces an attempted breakaway by a minority which rejects control from the new base state. For example, Georgia's break with Moscow in 1991 emboldened Abkhaz and South Ossetian secessionists to break away from Georgia.

These internal fights, however, are usually papered over within the phantom state itself. The bid for independence is usually reinterpreted as an age-old struggle for self-determination, one wrapped in the mantle of national grievances and national destiny. While internal rivalries may have been the original trigger for war against the base state, once *de facto* independence has been achieved, the origins of the conflict are remembered—or deliberately misconstrued—as a united struggle for freedom. Often, the war that led to the phantom state's emergence contributes to the sense of nationhood: the phantom state made war, and war helped make the phantom state. Phantom states play up the wartime experience, praising martyrs and building memorials. The risk of renewed war with the base state, often quite real, is used to stoke nationalist sentiment. Rival elites are often derided for their supposed willingness to compromise with the base state.

### **Regional Powers**

There are many weak states in the world, along with many opportunistic local leaders who would rather be president of their own country than an impecunious professor, engineer, or military officer in a regional city. But a critical additional feature of phantom statehood is the presence of one or more regional powers interested in the phantom state's continued existence.

Outside powers can have a variety of different interests in phantom states. The phantom state may represent a national liberation movement with which the leadership of the regional power has some natural sympathy because of ideology, ethnicity, or actions of the base state. Russian troops shore up Abkhazia, the Dniester Moldovan Republic, and South Ossetia; Armenia helps to keep Nagorno-Karabakh alive; and Turkey preserves Northern Cyprus. NATO forces intervened in 1999 to defeat Serb armies and carve out an independent Kosovo. Supporting the makers of a phantom state may be a strategic gambit which a regional power uses against a base state.

Even beyond cultural affinity or strategic calculations, domestic politics within the regional power may compel its foreign policymakers to support the phantom state. It is for this reason that interventions by regional powers in support of a would-be phantom state—from Turkey's 1974 action in Cyprus to Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia—are so often couched in the language of protecting secessionists against human rights violations by the base state. Interveners typically portray their actions as being aimed at preventing

genocide, supporting an embattled ethnic minority, or averting a humanitarian disaster. Conversely, base states—seeking to highlight their plight in international forums—have an incentive to portray the problem of their phantom state as the result of intervention itself. For the base state, the intervening power looks less like a magnanimous champion of human rights and more like an outsider seeking to further its own interests. Both lines of argument—selfless intervention on one hand, foreign meddling on the other—simplify a very complex set of relationships.

### **The International Community**

Phantom states are often the remnants of civil war, but from the perspective of international organizations and the international community at large, they are end-states preferable to continued fighting. The transformation of a civil war into a diplomatic stand-off over territory and sovereignty turns a bloody international crisis into a mere political conundrum. Over time, this basic preference of international actors can contribute to the reality of statehood for the phantom state. The attention of major players, especially the United States, is swiftly overtaken by other pressing challenges, while international organizations—the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the African Union—are tasked with providing good offices for ongoing negotiations, multilateral peacekeeping, or other peace-building measures between the base state and the *de facto* government in the phantom state.

Once these international organizations are in place, they too can see the continued existence of the phantom state as the least-bad outcome. It is preferable to a return to war, which would signal the complete failure of the good-offices or peacekeeping mission. It is preferable to full-fledged independence, which is by definition anathema to the base state and creates a precedent that many countries with restive minorities want to avoid. And it is preferable to a full return to the status quo ante, which is by definition anathema to the phantom state.

Beyond pressure from the base state, many governments which comprise international institutions fear the demonstration effect of successful secession for their own would-be phantoms.<sup>4</sup> Nor does the international community want to recognize that legitimacy derives from military success rather than peaceful means. Interim measures, such as the care of refugees, often pump resources into areas controlled by phantom states and thus relieve recognized governments of burdensome tasks. Over time, the task of the international presence is to keep all sides talking—attending summits, organizing working groups, designing confidence-building measures—but with little incentive to show progress toward a lasting solution to the dispute.

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## **The Destabilizing Survival Strategies of Phantom States**

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Successful phantom states succeed precisely because they pursue a range of survival strategies, drawing on the weakness of the base state and the sympathy of the international community. However, these strategies often perpetuate conflict, worsen governance, decrease economic prosperity, undermine democratization, and ironically

decrease the likelihood of recognition as a “real” member of the international system.

### **To Be or Not to Be . . .**

The question of whether to declare formal state status is one potential source of instability. Taiwan has never formally declared independence, even though it has been a functionally independent country since 1949. Indeed, its moving toward formal independence would create a major political and military crisis in East Asia, given China’s likely invasion to suppress secession and the implied security commitments to Taiwan on the part of the United States.

Ironically, the struggle for recognition is often the first casualty in the effort to preserve some degree of equilibrium among the base state, external patrons, and the international community. Potential patrons may have restive minorities of their own, which argues against supporting someone else’s decision to secede. Dependent on external support, the phantom state thus usually has an interest in preserving its ambiguous status—continuing to be a thorn in the base state’s side, without moving so far as to inspire other minorities at odds with the patron.

### **Pernicious Consequences**

Uncertainty over whether to pursue recognition complicates one of the phantom state’s greatest difficulties: maintaining elite cohesion. In 1994, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), both based in the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq, began fighting over lucrative smuggling routes. Fighting continued sporadically, and in 1996 the PUK concluded an alliance with Tehran to increase its power. Fearing that he would be overwhelmed by this combination of enemies, KDP leader Massoud Barzani in turn called on Saddam Hussein, and the central Iraqi government “invaded” its own northern Kurdish area, cooperating with KDP forces against the Iranian-aligned PUK and leading to the deaths of hundreds of PUK fighters.



A U.S. intervention later in 1996 eventually led Iraq to withdraw, but the PUK had suffered a devastating blow.

Fighting over smuggling routes may seem particularly petty, but phantom states are often built on shaky economic foundations. Some phantom states come into being from insurgencies, which by necessity cannot always openly tax and instead may smuggle drugs or coerce money from the population in order to survive. The phantom state's unclear status worsens these problems. Legal economic activity is often limited, since foreign trade agreements depend on external recognition.

When possible, phantom states may enmesh external sponsors in their illicit economies, raising the risk of financial loss to the sponsor if the phantom state is conquered or otherwise disappears. During the 1990s, Turkey opposed the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, fearing it would worsen its own Kurdish insurgency and foster demand for an independent Kurdish state in Turkey itself. Over time, however, smuggling in and out of Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey produced massive rewards to those involved—such as direct financial benefits to regional elites in southeastern Turkey, as well as providing an existing “state” toward which Kurds in Turkey could look for cultural support. Turkey eventually acquiesced to the (ambiguous) Kurdish phantom state next door precisely because it lessened Turkey's own challenges with respect to ethnic Kurdish citizens.

For a phantom state to survive, it must be able to extract and deploy military power. Because phantom states usually battle base states which lack strong conventional forces of their own, mobilization consists of acquiring small arms and finding willing bodies to fight, rather than developing a domestic arms industry or mastering the intricacies of combined arms tactics. Phantom state elites must establish smuggling networks or cultivate a foreign patron to ensure a steady flow of small arms and ammunition. Control of these networks and maintenance of this external relationship is essential. Too plentiful a supply of weapons can empower local warlords at the expense of the phantom state's leadership and otherwise fragment power, even to the point of anarchy. Too close a relationship with a foreign backer can open the phantom state to charges of simply being the stooge of some regional power.

Economic weakness does not usually hinder the quest for arms. Expensive weapons systems such as navies and air forces are rarely necessary. A new AK-47 assault rifle can cost only \$200 new, and less if used. One press report gave the

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salary of a soldier fighting for South Sudan at \$200 a month: hardly a princely sum but well above average in this impoverished area.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as former World Bank economist Paul Collier and others have pointed out, a lack of economic alternatives makes military mobilization easier, as young men have few well-paying alternatives.<sup>6</sup>

It is a rare phantom state that does not rely considerably on external patrons to help preserve the military balance. The phantom state can affect the propensity that it will receive aid in several ways. One is to maintain a degree of enmity toward the base state—usually the very reason that the phantom state gained support in the first place. If Hamas made peace with Israel, Nagorno–Karabakh cozied up to Azerbaijan, or Abkhazia played nice with Georgia, they would jeopardize Iranian, Armenian, and Russian support, respectively. Conversely, the very survival strategies of phantom states often increase the rivalry felt by the base state. Hamas’s outreach to Iran for weapons, logical given the regime’s security needs, confirmed the Islamist regime’s enmity to already-dubious Israelis. Thus the phantom state is often trapped in a zero-sum foreign policy: it attempts to play off the external patron against the base state, but any attempts to negotiate recognition or even a de facto truce may be met with opposition from the external sponsor.

### **Precarious Balancing Acts**

Inculcating a high degree of national sentiment, identity, and commitment to the cause of independence aids large-scale mobilization of the phantom state in both conventional and unconventional war. These entities often put out an unremitting stream of propaganda which emphasizes the struggle against the base state, the sacrifices of previous generations, and the value of volunteering for some form of service to the unrecognized homeland. The Hamas-run children’s television show “Tomorrow’s Pioneers,” for example, featured a Mickey Mouse lookalike with a high-pitched voice named Farfur, who would simulate using an AK-47 rifle. In a later episode, an Israeli interrogator beat Farfur to death while Nahoul, the talking bee that replaced Farfur, derided “criminal Jews.” Nahoul also died at the hands of the Israelis when, after he became sick, they refused him permission to cross into Egypt to see a doctor. Israeli shrapnel then killed yet another replacement, a talking rabbit named Assoud.<sup>7</sup>

In the Dniester Moldovan Republic, the local education ministry elaborated a long-range plan to construct what amounted to a new ethnic identity for the region’s mixed Ukrainian-, Russian-, and Romanian-speaking population. The program stressed the timeless differences between the Transnistrian and Moldovan

peoples and carved out a path of unique historical development that allegedly culminated in the creation of the new republic in the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup> The progressive institutionalization of these efforts creates new classes of citizens whose livelihoods depend on delivering the message of sovereignty and independence. Television producers, newspaper reporters, teachers, history professors, museum employees, and even local tourist boards can all be caught up in the ideological project of defining phantom statehood and then sustaining it.

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In turn, the base state usually seeks to reclaim the phantom state—rhetorically if not militarily—and in any event, its leaders will be loath to publicly admit the loss of territory. Stopping formal recognition of the phantom state becomes a diplomatic priority. Other governments are then left to choose between good relations with the base state or with the secessionists. The base state, however, is already recognized and usually wealthier and more powerful, giving it a decided advantage in a global system that prizes stability of borders.

Base states seek to use the advantage of relative power and legitimacy to sever a phantom state from its external supporters, increasing its international isolation. From 1961 until 1975, Iraqi Kurds enjoyed considerable independence, at times bordering on a phantom state, in northern Iraq. Iran provided a haven, arms, and training to the Kurds, helping them resist the Iraqi Army. But in 1975, Saddam Hussein's government conceded a border dispute to Iran in exchange for the withdrawal of this support. The Kurdish rebellion quickly collapsed.

The opposite strategy holds true for phantom states. Their relations with regional patrons are not always smooth. Indeed, regional supporters sometimes worry that a phantom state may pull its patron into an unwanted conflict by provoking the base state or otherwise acting irresponsibly toward its neighbors. But ultimately, phantom states have an incentive to cultivate their relationship with more powerful, recognized patrons and, where possible, to seek new alliances which might buttress their sovereignty vis-à-vis the base state.

Perhaps surprisingly, the governments of phantom states tend to be astute hyper-legalists. They are keenly aware of international law with respect to state emergence and recognition, and they are often keen to draw parallels between their situation and those of other unrecognized governments. This is all the more the case when they have managed to develop well-funded public relations operations in the West, bankrolled by external patrons, the sale of local

resources, or a sympathetic diaspora. For example, when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued its ruling on Kosovo's status in 2010—not calling for recognition but finding no basis for condemning the declaration as illegal—other phantom states quickly called for the ICJ to apply the same standards to their cases. The foreign ministry of Nagorno-Karabakh called the ruling an “important legal, political and moral act of universal value, which cannot be limited to Kosovo.”<sup>9</sup>

This hyper-legalism substitutes for the key quality that might actually make the international community—or at least Western states—most interested in recognizing the phantom state: that is, democracy. Real democratization appears to fall by the wayside in many phantom states. Extra-legal economies tend to benefit violent entrepreneurs, while international democracy assistance—which might help with the development of stable legal institutions and responsive political parties—bypasses phantom states because of the recognition issue. Moreover, the sense of being besieged usually benefits phantom governments and the militaries which support them. The constant emphasis on military preparedness empowers warlords and soldiers over civilian leaders. Uniforms often outnumber suits in phantom states, a condition that blocks the growth of truly responsive and responsible government. Without recognition and a stake in the regional and international order, phantom governments continue to prize their own security over other values, from human rights to competitive elections.

### **Does Legitimacy Really Matter Anymore?**

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Seeing phantom statehood as simply a legitimacy problem or a prolonged territorial dispute misunderstands the complexities of how such entities are born and the strategies they pursue in order to survive. In the 21st century, peripheral elites in phantom states are able to carry on a host of state-like activities without regard to external sovereignty. They can engage in trans-border commerce, accrue military power, educate their children, build infrastructure, and in many cases benefit from direct economic aid and other assistance programs from external patrons.

Moreover, as time goes on, phantom states become more adept at using these elements for their survival. Phantom states, like real ones, are learning enterprises. When external patrons falter, phantom states build up their military resources and prepare to defend themselves against the base state. When elite cohesion breaks down, domestic out-bidding may cause elites to push for restarting a war with the base state. When the international community seems to be ignoring their plight, they find precedents or other elements of international law to buttress their case for real independence.

The encouraging news about phantom states is that they function in many ways like recognized countries, and in most cases should be treated as such by political analysts. Especially for phantom states that have proven to be the longest-lasting—places such as Northern Cyprus, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno–Karabakh—there is much to learn about how states are made and how they survive.

The less encouraging news is that renewed war is a constant possibility among virtually all phantom states. Recognition is often a gift that means more to the giver than to the phantom state's leadership. But while the carrot of external sovereignty may hold few attractions to elites, it does have one feature whose absence is noticeable in all cases: it has a dampening effect on the ambitions of recognized governments and situates their decision-making in a web of international law, norms, and expectations.

The real danger with phantom states is that low expectations lead to low accountability. Entities which have no real stake in the international system are disinclined to worry about upsetting it. For this reason alone, phantom states deserve to be moved from their position as curiosities of international affairs to being seen as a new form of state-making in an age of globalization, overlapping sovereignties, and multiple political loyalties.

Phantom states are caught between twin principles of international law. On one hand, the leaders of these entities underscore the right to national self-determination. The specific cultural or ethnic heritage of the phantom state's population is frequently used to make the argument for national sovereignty. In some instances, leaders can point to long histories of conflict with, or repression by, the base state to bolster their moral claim. On the other hand, recognized countries emphasize the idea of the stability of border and territorial integrity. If every micro-nationalism can lay claim to its own state, they argue, the international system will be an even more dangerous and chaotic place.

### **Time to Acknowledge Reality**

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What is to be done? Each phantom state is a unique case and provides a specific set of challenges to regional stability and great power interests. There is no one-size solution. Indeed, diplomatic energy and legal creativity have allowed the world's oldest phantom—Taiwan—to enjoy real statehood in all but name. In the process, the long record of actually caring about Taiwan—because of the massive potential for ill if China and the United States got things wrong—helped Taiwan in other ways. It helped shift its practices on democracy and human rights; it assisted in the spectacular successes of the Taiwanese economy; and it created a set of incentives for Taiwan to be a

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responsible member of its region and of the world, despite lacking the vital quality of external sovereignty.

Northern Cyprus and Nagorno-Karabakh are not Taiwans. But neither are they political will-o'-the-wisps that will soon disappear. So long as phantom states are seen as little more than separatists or craven beneficiaries of illicit commerce, the international community has little chance of engaging their citizens, holding their leaders to account, and making them jointly responsible for the security and stability of

their own neighborhoods. If they are treated only as curiosities of the international order, phantom states have little reason to care about upsetting it. The result would be a return to the violence and disorder that originally spawned them.

## Notes

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3. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): pp. 75–90 [http://wand.stanford.edu/courses/polisci350c/classonly/fearon\\_laitin2003.pdf](http://wand.stanford.edu/courses/polisci350c/classonly/fearon_laitin2003.pdf).
4. See Barbara F. Walter, “Building Reputation: Why Governments Fight Some Separatists but Not Others,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (April 2006): pp. 313–330, <http://bama.ua.edu/~sborrell/psc521/separatists.pdf>; and Walter, “Information, Uncertainty, and the Decision to Secede,” *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (2006): pp. 105–135.
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7. Lawrence Wright, "Captives: What really happened during the Israeli attacks?" *The New Yorker*, November 9, 2009., [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/11/09/091109fa\\_fact\\_wright](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/11/09/091109fa_fact_wright).
8. Vladimir Solonari, "Creating a 'People': A Case Study in Post-Soviet History-Writing," *Kritika* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2003): pp. 411–448.
9. "Statement of the NKR Ministry of Foreign Affairs Related to the Resolution of the UN International Court on the Independence of Kosovo," <http://www.nkr.am/en/statements/116/>.