

Independence Movements and Their Aftermath

Evaluating the Likelihood of Success

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THE ISSUE

The success of an independence movement is never preordained. Not only is independence itself an improbable endeavor in most cases, but the quality of that independence—whether most people are better off or worse off—varies considerably. Elements outside the movement's control, including historical context, great power actors, or unpredictable events, are often the most important factors in determining its success.

- Independence movements cannot manufacture many of the most important conditions that contribute to their success, but they can seize upon opportune moments.
- Several important factors are well within the control of an independence movement, but they often fail to develop.
- By analyzing a range of domestic, regional, and international factors in a holistic manner, policymakers can better predict how successful a state founded by a self-determination movement is likely to be after it gains independence.

INTRODUCTION

Americans, especially in the twenty-first century, tend to underestimate the perils associated with changes in government. The American Revolution was an unlikely triumph. The independence movement simmered for less than a decade before war broke out, and the war lasted less than a decade, too. The yield was a heterogeneous republican polity that had little precedent, but that became a global model in the following centuries. The U.S. Civil War was a bloody, wrenching conflict, but a one-time event. The outcome produced a union with enough local autonomy to prove resilient, even if it encountered pockets of intolerance. The nation that arose from the Civil War grew into a global economic and military powerhouse, and no violent transfer of political power has ever followed.

Hundreds of other independence movements around the world have not fared as well. Conflicts have dragged on for decades, sometimes precipitating massacres and forced migrations. If they ever yielded governments, those governments were often unsteady and subject to constant threats from within and without. Economies lurched from crisis to crisis, police and courts emerged as antagonists in society rather than arbiters, and security remained fleeting. These independence movements do not achieve stability; instead, they contribute to instability, and the population suffers. The worst emerged as failed states, with their hard-fought autonomy under threat from a loose amalgam of fiefdoms and foreign proxies that, collectively, impose some kind of order. It is not a fate many would seek, but it is all too common.

CONSIDERING INDEPENDENCE

To maximize the potential for a good outcome, populations and leaderships considering independence should explore two things in depth. The first is a fair assessment of what independence is likely to yield. Revolutionaries and secessionists promise they will deliver everything that the population currently enjoys, and more. In practice, merely maintaining current levels of wealth and security is difficult for new governments, even in impoverished and insecure places. With expectations raised by advocates of independence in the pre-independence period, the challenge of meeting public demands can swiftly turn into a political crisis for a new entity and can devolve into scapegoating of political opponents. Things can quickly spiral downward from there.

A clear-eyed assessment of the unalterable aspects of the new state—the size and composition of the population, the geography and geology of the land, water availability, resources, and a host of other factors—is vital. Those characteristics will cast a long shadow over the chances of a new and independent state. While a cadre of activists in any population will be determined to pursue independence, it is important that some portion of the aspiring polity continually evaluate the wisdom of the act, comparing its outcome to various levels of autonomy and levels of independence that do not sever ties of sovereignty.

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Even if that results in a conclusion that independence remains desirable, a second task is necessary: understanding the circumstances that make it most likely that independence will produce positive results. Movements rarely can determine the moment that independence is reached, but they can exert strong influence over the context in which it occurs. Allies can be won over, and skeptics reassured. Economies can be developed, domestic institutions can be built, and internal rifts can be healed. If independence comes too swiftly, important elements may not be in place, imperiling the project. With planning, success is not assured, but chances for success can be enhanced significantly.

EVALUATING THE CONTEXT

Several aspects of the context seem to have a significant effect on the success of post-independence societies. The first is the [international environment](#). While small independence movements cannot shape the international environment, they can judge its general contours. Is there a

wave of interest in self-determination, or acceptance of self-determination, or a broader concern with faltering sovereignty? In the Balkans, for example, the breakup of Yugoslavia created an expectation that new states would arise, and questions were all about how many would arise and when. The normal resistance of states to the rise of new states was in abeyance.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia, aspiring breakaway republics from Georgia, have been unable to join a historic wave. In addition, they have relied heavily on a single international patron—Russia—and incurred the opposition of all Western countries as well as virtually all the other states in the world. In this instance, the obstacle was not global solidarity with the state from which they sought to secede, Georgia,

but rather wariness about the chief advocate of their independence, Russia. The absence of broad international



A member of a Kurdish Peshmerga battalion shows his ink-stained finger after casting his vote in the Kurdish independence referendum at a polling station in Arbil on September 25, 2017.

Source: SAFIN HAMED/AFP/Getty Images

support—and the presence of narrow international support—is consequential.

International attitudes toward statehood can change, both in general and in specific cases. For example, the United States and Australia were united for many years in their opposition to independence for East Timor, and that greatly inhibited chances for Timorese independence. The end of the Cold War diminished U.S. opposition, and in time, the United States helped to bring Australia around to supporting independence. This was a change in the very broad international context that Timorese did not influence but upon which they could capitalize. Bangladesh's independence was spurred by a more intricate dance—Pakistan's assistance to President Nixon's opening to China brought the United States and Pakistan closer, alarming Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who feared Pakistan might displace India as the most powerful nation on the subcontinent. To counter Pakistan's rise, Gandhi drew closer to the Soviet Union, and she stepped up Indian support

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for Bangladeshi separatism. In this case, it was not greater U.S. support that spurred the independence movement, but instead a neighbor's alarm at U.S. diplomacy.

It is not just states that matter. Broad international support and multilateral organizations can play a vital role in the early years of state-building, having a dramatically positive effect on the process. For example, in Kosovo and Timor-Leste, sustained UN support was critical to the new states' success. Money, training, and security assistance all played a key role, both in early days and in the years that follow. In the current international environment, support of a similar scale, intensity, and duration seems unlikely for fledgling states. Donor coordination, when possible, can be a large multiplier for new states receiving aid. In South Sudan, donors' competing aims and requirements posed a significant challenge for the new government.

Finally, beyond the state, diasporas can play a significant role. In some cases, such as Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, diaspora support for combatants can prolong conflict and reward more violent elements of an

opposition movement. While some see diasporas hastening independence in that circumstance, they also boost the fortunes of armed groups that may handicap a peaceful post-conflict environment. Post-independence, diasporas can be an important source of funding for new states. Jews around the world have poured money into Palestine and then Israel for more than a century, and donations currently run at billions of dollars per year;¹ the Eritrean diaspora is a critical source of national revenue and continues to shape in significant measure the economy and politics of the country. It does not always work out that way. The Palestinian expatriate community has been relatively reluctant to invest in Palestine even after the Oslo Accords seemed to pave the way to statehood.²

The second important piece of the context is the [regional environment](#). Some new states have supportive states on their borders (even if the state from which they are seeking to break away resists independence). India, for example, strongly supported Bangladeshi independence and was vital to its success. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi gave safe haven to Awami League separatists from Bengal, helped mediate rifts within the Bangladesh independence movement, and established a joint military command with separatists. In Eritrea, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) gained power almost simultaneously with a new government taking power in Addis Ababa, and the new Ethiopian government was actually supportive of Eritrean independence from Ethiopia. In fact, Ethiopia was the first state to recognize Eritrea after its independence referendum.

Having positive relations with a neighbor does more than just allow those agitating for independence easy access to a safe zone, although that is important. Warm relations also allow for the development of trade and investment ties that can boost the new economy. The opposite is true as well. While many factors contributed to the misery of South Sudan, the profound weakness of the new country's economy (both in overall output as well as its dependence on oil revenues, which were diverted to enrich a tiny few) was among the most important. So, too, was the immediate dispute with Sudan about oil revenues, which created the new country's first economic crisis.

On the other side, threatened states may seek to play the role of spoilers. In Timor-Leste, for example, militia groups operating from Indonesia were a sustained challenge. Serbia's military tried to prevent an independent Kosovo from emerging, and only the intervention NATO forces made independence possible. In Eritrea, relations

with Ethiopia initially were warm, providing a positive environment for success. Those relations deteriorated six years after independence and dissolved into a conflict that set Eritrea on a path to authoritarianism.

The third element is the [economic context](#). Populations of new states often have high expectations for services the new government will provide (perhaps none so much as in South Sudan, where an immiserated population had wholly unrealistic expectations of a strong and immediate economic boost after independence). Managing those expectations, and delivering economic welfare, requires advanced skills from new governments, and those skills are as much political as they are economic.

If well managed, natural resources can provide a crucial source of wealth for a new government. For example, Timorese leaders recognized the need to manage with great caution the oil wealth they inherited. They swiftly enlisted Norwegian experts, who provided valuable guidance. But natural resources can also be a curse, often engendering corruption and creating economic distortions that can inhibit the growth of the labor force.

Corruption is endemic in any society but can be especially corrosive in fragile new countries. War economies produce opportunities for profiteering, so countries that emerge out of warfare have especially difficult times stamping out

corruption. The large international presence in both Kosovo and Timor-Leste did not prevent corruption but helped limit its extent. South Sudan swiftly fell victim to corruption, and the entrenchment of that corruption continues to fuel conflict to this day.

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Finally, industries can often be developed with independence, and that can have a dramatically positive impact on conditions. For example, Bangladesh moved quickly to improve its investment climate after an initial economic disaster, and the country's vibrant garment industry is a product of very deliberate policy choices by a relatively new government.

The fourth element is the [political context](#). Often but not always, a political party championed independence and has dominance in the immediate aftermath. This was true, for example, of the Awami League in Bangladesh and the EPLF in Eritrea. In those cases, it can be difficult to adapt to more

pluralistic governance. In South Sudan, politics already were deeply polarized by the time of independence. Continued conflict has increased that polarization. Where military forces played a key role, as they did in Bangladesh, it can be difficult to transition to genuine civilian rule. Indeed, in Bangladesh, a brief period of civilian rule led to a series of coups that left the army in charge.

The politics that emerge are, in part, a function of the quality of the [leadership](#) that new governments have, which is the fifth element. Charismatic leaders can both rally populations to the new state and unify them. Leaders with good diplomatic skills can build crucial support for the new state with neighboring countries, with donor nations, and with international

institutions. José Ramos-Horta, for example, was a principal East Timorese diplomat from the age of 25. He later won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts and served as Timor-Leste's



South Sudanese civilians flee fighting in a United Nations base in the northeastern town of Malakal on February 18, 2016, where gunmen opened fire on civilians.

Source: JUSTIN LYNCH/AFP/Getty Images

foreign minister, prime minister, and president, building both domestic and international support that proved vital to his country's success. The repressive turn of Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki and the spiraling corruption around President Salva Kiir in South Sudan have dealt a blow to both countries. Bangladesh has a somewhat mixed record. Independence brought in a charismatic leader, Sheikh Mujib, who turned more authoritarian when the economy weakened. His assassination in 1975 led to more than a decade of military rule, which was finally displaced by a popular movement.

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The sixth element pertains to the quality and capacity of the new state's [institutions](#). Below the leader, new governments do not come to power with equal capacity. Some inherit institutions, a skilled bureaucracy, and a skilled workforce. In Timor-Leste, severe violence triggered a devastating brain drain, yet a number of Timorese bureaucrats played important roles in the new state's administration. In Bangladesh, many senior government officials returned to West Pakistan after independence, leaving relatively junior officials to cope with awesome responsibilities, contributing

to economic problems that plagued Bangladesh upon independence, but providing a basis for stabilization in years that followed.

The seventh element is the [security context](#). When new states come to power through armed struggle, it may be difficult to demilitarize the society. Armed groups that participated in the fight for independence may seek to increase their share of power in the aftermath. Elements that opposed independence in the first place, often with the support of the rump state, may not go quietly. The Balkans have particularly struggled with this challenge, but they are in no way unique. Military officers sought power in Bangladesh soon after independence and controlled the country for decades afterward. Eritrea was relatively successful in making the transition from a long-running insurgency to an independent civil state, but the eruption of a border war with Ethiopia five years after independence put Eritrean politics into an authoritarian tailspin from which they have still not recovered. Singapore was expelled from Malaysia but benefited from the British military presence for the first six years of its independence. While there was considerable fear of unrest due to economic dislocation, the United Kingdom's interest in supporting order in Singapore was a significant security asset. On the purely domestic side, poor security can exacerbate political polarization, as it has done in South Sudan.

The last piece of the context is a bucket of [social issues](#). In many new states, a large part of the population believes that

it shares a heritage and a history. Shared histories of repression and common grievances were critical in uniting and mobilizing communities in Bangladesh, Eritrea, Kosovo, South Sudan, and Timor-Leste. And yet a shared history of repression is not sufficient. Social unity in a new state is important and is often dependent on how well the new state deals with minorities and with how well these minorities deal with the new state. The western Balkans, in particular, are shot through with minority communities, often with ties to surrounding states. Balkan case studies are a particularly rich vein to mine to understand how national identity can be built, and the different political outcomes in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo are, in part, a reflection of how each government has dealt with its minority communities. They present cautionary tales not to be too generous nor too miserly.



Bangladeshi residents take part in a parade to mark the country's 45th Victory Day in Dhaka on December 16, 2016.

Source: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP/Getty Images

While it is hard to quantify the cultural legacy that new countries bring to their independence struggles, it surely has a role. Some communities cherish their images as warriors, others as traders and entrepreneurs. These ideas surely imprint themselves on the new state. On the more local level, customary practices of dispute resolution at the village level proved a boon to Timor-Leste's reconciliation efforts, providing an important asset on which the new nation could build.

THE “HIDING HAND”

Albert O. Hirschman famously observed the utility of the “hiding hand” in development projects. Referring to three schemes that had an especially bumpy start, he argued,

If the project planners had known in advance all the difficulties and troubles that were lying in store for the project, they probably never would have touched it . . . [and] in some, though not all of these cases advance knowledge of these difficulties would therefore have been unfortunate, for the difficulties and the ensuing search for solutions set in motion a train of events which not only rescued the project, but often made it particularly valuable.³

Self-determination movements are far more complex than mere economic development projects. They have multiple vectors of success, from political to economic to social to security, and they almost by definition take place in a fraught environment.

There is a utility in the “hiding hand,” or, seen alternatively, the willingness to pursue independence even when success is not guaranteed. That is different than pursuing independence regardless of conditions, whether in the aspiring independent entity itself or globally. The level of success we should expect from independence movements is not random. There are things that movements can do to improve their chances. Chances are only that, though. Nothing guarantees success, and events inevitably take their own course.

In a follow-up to Hirschman's study almost 50 years later, two prominent professors analyzed more than 2,000 projects. They found that a hiding hand was often at work, but that planners overestimated the benefits of projects more than they underestimated the costs.⁴ Particularly striking is their assertion that cost overruns are common,

but “benefits overruns” are rare. There are many incentives to overpromise results. There are fewer reliable pathways to deliver them.

Several remarkably successful independence movements have inspired the world, and a few quite unsuccessful ones have distressed it. The success of any movement is never foreordained.

The level of success we should expect from independence movements is not random.

Each movement is, as in the memorable title of one book on the American independence movement, “a leap in the dark.”⁵ But two things seem clear. The first is that the single most important determinative factor in the success of any independence movement is often beyond the control of such a movement. It has to do with the historical context, with great power actors, or with unpredictable events that emerge on the scene. Movements can capitalize on these moments, but they cannot manufacture them. The second is that a whole host of important factors are well within the control of such a movement, but movements do not always seek to act on many of them. Activists become so convinced in the justness of their cause that they do not do everything they might to increase its likelihood of success.

It is all a gamble, but shrewd gamblers do what they can to improve their odds. ■

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Cover Photo: “Pesikiza (Research)” by Maria Madeira, Timor-Leste, January 2010; Photograph by David Palazón

ENDNOTES

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