

Book Review

Butt, Ahsan. *Secession and Security: Explaining State Strategy against Separatists*
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There are a plethora of studies on civil war, in international relations, comparative politics and security studies, in the last two decades and they breakdown into three overlapping categories, those that study structural conditions, others that study insurgents and rebels and finally like the author Ahsan Butt those that focus on state strategy.

His point of departure with conventional approaches is that they primarily consider domestic factors: a dominant school on state reaction to ethno-nationalist movements emphasise reputation, signalling and deterrence. Act tough to ethno-nationalist demands and the tough reputation will deter future aspirants to secessionism. Another perspective that is challenged is the veto-player argument which argues that internal structures of states and how its response is dictated to by veto factions. Finally there is the argument that links internal structures with reputation and that states response to succession depends on administration type.

Ahsan Butt argues that secession dramatically alters the international balance of power and produces negative outcomes for the rump state. His central argument is that the international system exerts a significant influence the first is the impact on domestic politics and the second is how it can exaggerate interstate insecurities leading to shifts in the balance of power. He meticulously considers a range of alternative explanations, the structural argument, the reputation thesis and suggests that the external environment is much more important in understanding the direction of secessionist movements where they exit through a hard and bloody conflict or that they depart through a velvet divorce.

He claims his theoretical framework accounts for internal distinctions in state response to ethno-nationalist movements, accounts for variations over time and also explains intensity of conflict and finally the geo-political impact on such conflicts. His focus is initially on South Asia where he tests the theory: compares the Pakistanis state's response to the

Bengali and Baloch movements and India's response to Kashmir, Punjab and Assam in the 1980s and 1990s. He then later in the book explores the explanatory range of the theory by examining historical examples from various parts of the worlds: Ottoman treatment of Armenians, Israel-Palestine conflict, Czech-Slovak Velvet Divorce and separation of Norway and Sweden, and finally reflects on the US Civil War.

He use South Asia as case selection on which to develop his paradigm that he goes out to test in historical and comparative approaches. In the case of Pakistan he investigates, in a brutally frank analysis, why the Pakistan state resorted to indiscriminate and extreme form of violence in the case of Bengali secession in the 1970s and yet handled the Baloch insurgency three years later in not so an extreme manner. Ahsan Butt argues that the difference in approach is premised on third party support for the insurgency. Bengali succession was tied to concerns of Indian involvement ratcheting up state anxiety while no such external support was available for the Baloch. Thus arguing that Pakistan's justification for extreme action in East Bengal was because of the external security dilemma the rebellion raised. He then explores the Indian case studies comparing Assam, Kashmir and Punjab arguing that Assam was dealt with minimal coercion and through accommodation as there was no external threat perception and the same was the case for Punjab until Pakistan began to become involved in the Khalistan movement and then the level of coercion radically increased. In Kashmir at the first sign of trouble coercion was resorted to in the late 1980s with steadily escalating repression. This Ahsan Butt argues is because Kashmir represents the greatest external security threat to the Indian state and had to be dealt with harshly.

Certainly there is some justification in the argument that interstate relations play a role in state's strategy to handling succession movements however the thesis is over stated and that it looks at the issues of ethnic regulation only very late in the process when it becomes a full blown secessionist

movement. How ethnic difference is managed prior to becoming full blown secessionist movement is critical in understanding these developments. In the case of East Bengal the language movement and the implementation of martial law in 1958 was designed to prevent East Bengal taking control of the parliamentary process. Failure to accommodate set a trajectory towards secession which even in 1971 was not a well-defined agenda to many Bengalis, which would have been apparent to the author if he had consulted Bangladeshi source. Furthermore Bhutto's intransigence in the critical negotiations was an example of a veto actor who was working in concert with the military-bureaucracy. In Baluchistan case the tiny Baloch population was never considered to be a serious threat to the state given its contiguous borders, unlike East Bengal, and secession was never a serious consideration. Even today where there are serious human right situations in Balochistan the external dimension is there to justify the harsh actions, which were triggered by the intransigence of the military under Musharraf and the unwillingness to accommodate. Similarly when you consider the case of Assam, Punjab and Kashmir in India. The issue of management of difference has led some authors to argue that India is an ethnic democracy where there is an hegemonic discourse centred on Hindu identity. The only states and regions that were not accommodated by the centre were non-Hindu and the failure to manage difference provide external actors the opportunity to intervene.

Ahsan Butt makes a useful contribution by highlighting the international framework in explaining state response to secessionist movements but his question is very narrowly defined looking at ethnic difference when its trajectory implicitly or explicitly is separatist. The issue, and there is a substantial literature engaging in this area in other disciplines, which doesn't seem to be reflected in the book, is why ethnic difference isn't accommodated and moves to becoming an ethno-nationalist movement hell bent on secession.
