

Retaining the Periphery: Strategies of Metropolises in the Struggle Against Secession

(A Comparative Study of Strategies for Territorial Retention)

Olivia Hofman / Supervised by Dr. David Hughes
University of Toronto / Laidlaw Scholars Programme



Introduction

“Future historians may call our era ‘the age of secession.’ It may become ‘the age of wars of secession.’” – Allen Buchanan, The Age of Succession

Why do some independence movements succeed while others fail? This project investigates how states retain control of overseas territories through strategies of coercion, concession, and international maneuvering.

This study examines how internal governance shapes sovereignty and impacts citizens' identities, challenging the orthodox view on non-self-governing entities—that is against the notion that sub-sovereign status is often the best option for microstates. The research critiques the homeland-external dynamic that sustains colonial dependency, exploring challenges to self-determination, particularly why independence referendums often fail, and providing an uniform study on independence movements through a legal perspective.

HYPOTHESIS

States retain their overseas territories by either:

- (a) military use
- (b) use of legislation or policy

Literature Review

In order to create a standardized framework, this study uses Peter Krause's 8 theories of state retention in order to categorize and classify each states' retention method/behavior. Beyond that, this study also makes use of Kathleen Cunningham's "divide-and-conquer" versus "divide-and-concede" tactic. In "divide and conquer," states attempts to foster internal division within the movement. In "divide and concede," the state grants limited concessions, like partial autonomy, local representation, or recognition of cultural rights.

TABLE 1 States' repertoire of counter-secession strategies

Strategy	Tactics and causal logic	Historical examples	Relevant scholarship
Cultural assimilation	Strengthen the common aspects of the dominant state identity and weak separatist identities through education, promotion or restriction of language, religion and culture.	'Russification' in Russia/USSR, American assimilation of immigrants and Native Americans (19th & 20th centuries)	Brown (2007); Darden and Mylonas (2016)
Administrative organisation	Change internal administrative lines to divide the population and prevent the rise of a proto-state. Alternatively, concede some regional autonomy in exchange for loyalty to the state government.	United Kingdom and Uganda/Buganda (1958–62); Post-Soviet Secessionism (1990s); Nigeria and Republic of Biafra (1967–70); Gran Colombia (1828–30)	Forsberg (2013); Griffiths (2015); Ratner (1996)
Civilian displacement	Physically disperse or detain civilians from the national group to separate them from each other and/or their movement; move non-separatist civilians in to change regional demographics.	Morocco and Western Sahara (1975); China and Xinjiang (1940s to present); USSR and Chechnya (1944)	Burds (2007); Toft (2002)
Banning secessionist political activity	Make secession illegal, and ban its organisations from the political process, making it more challenging to build a robust secessionist movement by raising the costs of advocacy and decreasing support for secessionism among the population.	Batasuna Party in Spain (2003); Bulgaria and United Macedonian Organisation (2001); Cameroon and Southern Cameroons National Council (2001); China and Taiwan (2005)	Bourne (2020); Ginsburg and Versteeg (2018)
Fragmenting the secessionist movement	Divide the secessionist movement by fostering personal and organisational splits, discriminately cracking down on the strongest group to allow the emergence of internal rivals.	Israel and the PLO/Hamas (1980s); France and the FLN (1954–1962)	Cunningham (2011); Krause (2017); Lawrence (2010); Pearlman (2011)
Economic coercion	Restricting flow of wealth and resources to the secessionist territory and/or population to weaken it via blockades, boycotts, and sanctions. Offering enhanced access to food, jobs, and education in exchange for loyalty to the state.	British and Malaya (1948–1960); France and Algeria (1959–1962); Nigeria and Republic of Biafra (1967–70); Bangladesh and Shanti Bahini (1972)	Huysmans and Crombez (2020); Muro and Woertz (2018); Thomas and Falola (2020)

Violent repression	Weaken and coerce the secessionist movement by increasing policing of secessionist populations, violent repression of protests, arresting movement leaders, and military assaults on secessionist areas and organisations.	Ethiopia and Eritrea (1961–1991); India and Kashmir (1989–1994); Sri Lanka and the Tamils (2008–2009); British in Northern Ireland (1969–2007)	Butt (2017); Spruyt (2005)
Blocking international recognition	Forcing unilateral attempts at secession, pressuring states, regional bodies, and international organisations to not recognise the secessionists as a legitimate movement or as a new state.	Pakistan and Bangladesh (1971–1979); the United Kingdom and Northern Cyprus (1983); Serbia and Kosovo (2008 to present)	Coggins (2014); Ker-Lindsay (2012); Siroky et al. (2021)

Case Studies

Table 1: By using the 4 successful secession movements in the 20th century, we are able to derive trends of successful independence movements

	Bangladesh	Eritrea	Kosovo	South Sudan
What strategic, economic, or symbolic value does the territory hold for the state?	Rich agricultural land, major rivers, large population; economically significant to Pakistan, access to Bay of Bengal (Sisson and Rose 2023)	Red Sea coastline (only maritime outlet/prevented a landlocked Ethiopia), port access, strategic location. Fertile highlands and mineral resources, a symbol of national unity (Italian colonized territory) (BBC News 2011)	Historically and symbolically important to Serbia (medieval Serbian heartland), important mining complex (important economic tool) (Frantz 2009)	Oil-rich region; strategic in controlling Nile tributaries, contains the Sudd wetlands and major White Nile tributaries, vast arable lands. Source of revenue for oil and crops (Blanchard 2019)
What strategies did the state use to maintain control?	Military repression, political marginalization, restricting Bengali language/culture (ibid.)	Military campaigns, forced resettlements, suppression of dissent (BBC News 2011)	Political repression, security crackdowns (BBC News 2012)	Military campaigns, forced displacement, co-optation of local militias (ibid.)
How has the state governed or treated the population of the territory? (Divide and conquer? Divide and concede?)	Repression of Bengali identity; centralization of power; divide-and-concede along religion/class, more successfully divide-and-conquer through aggressive administrative and educational restrictions (ibid.)	Harsh military rule; suppression of Eritrean nationalist movements (divide and conquer) ("Eritrea History, Flag, Capital, Population, Map, & Facts Britannica," n.d.)	Limited autonomy, repression of Albanian majority; some divide-and-concede tactics pre-1970's autonomy, but after faced with the threat, divide-and-conquer (ibid.)	Neglect and militarized control; ethnic divisions exploited to weaken unity; a mix of the two treatments, more so trading between conquering and conceding to keep repression strong (ibid.)
What grievances motivated secessionist or independence demands? (Underlined subjects demonstrates the popular secession grievances).	Linguistic and cultural discrimination, economic exploitation, <u>political exclusion</u> (ibid.)	Political marginalization, religious/ethnic differences, <u>economic neglect</u> (Kendie 2005)	<u>Ethnic discrimination</u> , denial of autonomy, repression by Serbian state (ibid.)	<u>Political exclusion</u> , <u>ethnic marginalization</u> , <u>economic neglect</u> (ibid.)
Did external states, organizations (UN, AU, EU), or great powers support or oppose secession (including by helping the metropole)?	<u>Great power</u> of India greatly supported Bengali independence. Soviet Union in turn supported India (and Bangladesh)	Eritrean rebels received some international sympathy from regional and Cold War (<u>great powers</u>) patrons (Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, the Arab League, Sudan) but limited direct support. China, Soviet bloc, Cuba all supported Ethiopia (Kendie 2005)	Most Western states (US, UK, France, Germany, great powers) supported Kosovo. NATO intervention later; mixed international views on diplomatic recognition before full independence (ibid.)	Some UN and regional attention (independence referendum monitored by Kenya, Uganda, and the US), limited external support until later stages (ibid.)
Is the territory remote or adjacent to the metropole's core (capital/administrative city)?	Remote, separated by India (East Pakistan)	Adjacent from Addis Ababa; geographically isolated	Adjacent to Serbia's core but distinct	Adjacent, southernmost region of Sudan
Was the movement united or divided by ethnic, political, or class differences?	Largely united around Bengali nationalism (ibid.)	Fragmented by religion/ideology but generally united against Ethiopia (BBC News 2011)	Largely united ethnically; some political factionalism (ibid.)	Fragmented along ethnic and political lines, though shared goal of autonomy (ibid.)
What was the outcome for the population?	Widespread violence in 1971, mass displacement, eventual liberation war (ibid.)	Long armed struggle, humanitarian suffering, widespread displacement (ibid.)	Repression and violence, but maintained strong Albanian identity (ibid.)	Civil war, humanitarian crises, mass displacement, continuing insecurity (ibid.)

Table 2: I use my three case studies to understand what strategies were used by the metropolises in the midst of these disputed territories

Mechanism	Chagos Islands	New Caledonia	Western Sahara
Military/basing/security leverage	Very strong (Diego Garcia) — primary retention tool	Moderate (French deployments as backdrop)	Strong (Morocco military control); external actors (Algeria, US) shape balance
Legal/constitutional devices	Domestic BIOT statutes; executive control	Nouméa Accord + special electoral roll; French constitutional supremacy	Moroccan administrative integration; contested legal claims; ICJ opinion supports Sahrawi rights
Electoral/franchise design	Not applicable (population removed)	Critical — special roll shapes outcomes	Voter ID & eligibility disputes central to referendum impasse
Economic/resource leverage	Fisheries, strategic rents	Nickel revenues, provincial economic networks	Phosphate, fisheries, potential hydrocarbons; resource contracts used as leverage
Administrative population engineering	Forced displacement of Chagossians	Long-term settler demographics shifted Kanak minority	Settlement policies and integration of Moroccan nationals in "Southern Provinces"

Figure 1: Through assigning a value from 0 (none at all) to 5 (strongest use) on table 2, we can create a radar graph and observe the most popular and strongest uses of certain retention strategies/tools

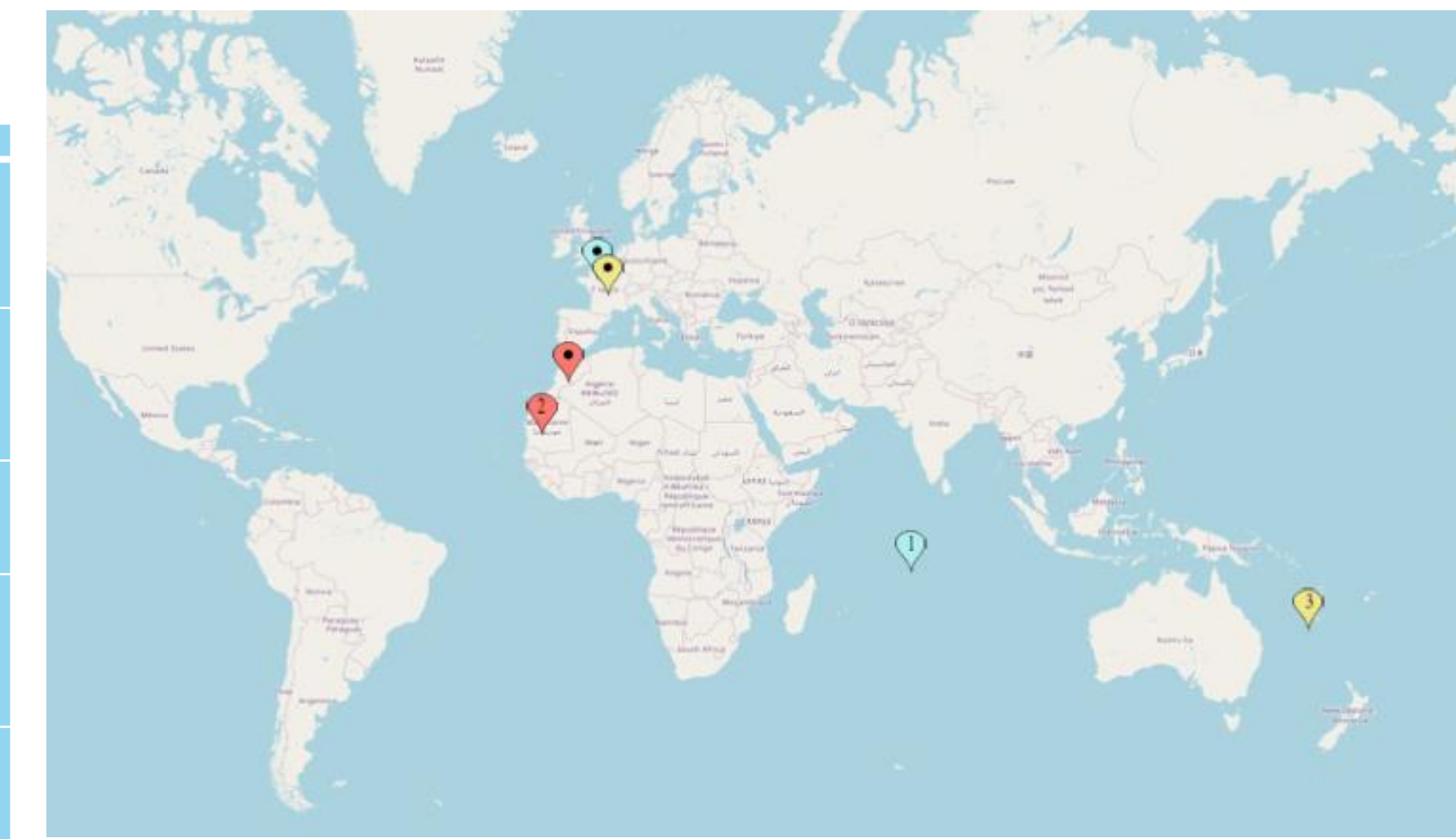
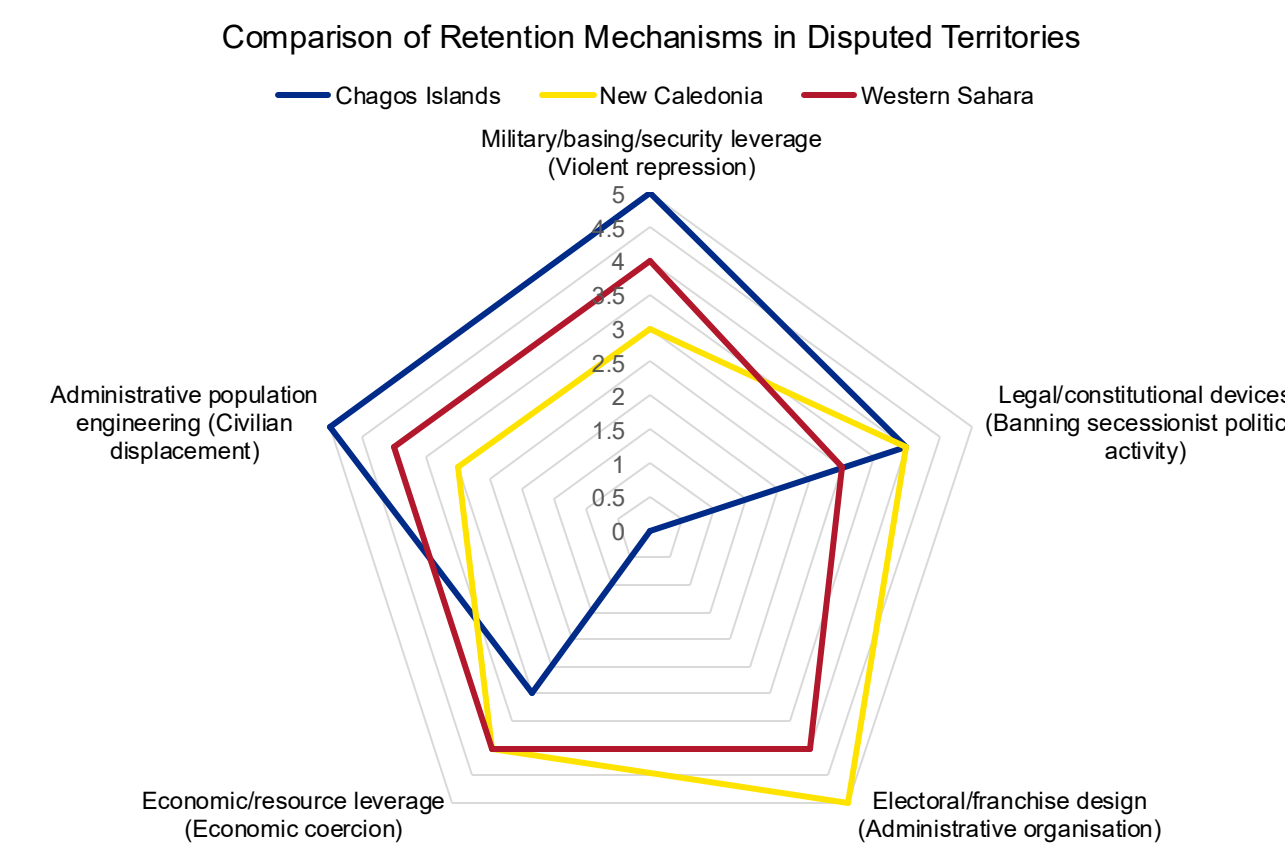


Figure 2: Map of coordinates of each of the disputed territories emphasizing the distance between metropole and periphery. Courtesy of MapCustomizer



Map of Chagos Archipelago, courtesy of Kontinentalist



Map of Western Sahara, courtesy of UN Maps

Findings

Through analysis of table 1, we can derive some traits that call for a successful independence movement:

- ON REPRESSION: Repression backfires. Military and political repression often fuels stronger nationalist unity.
- ON OUTSIDE ACTORS: External support is decisive. Recognition or intervention by great powers (e.g., India in Bangladesh, NATO in Kosovo) often determines outcomes.
- ON DIVIDED MOVEMENTS: Unity increases success. Cohesive nationalist movements (Bangladesh, Kosovo) fare better than fragmented ones (South Sudan).
- ON GEOGRAPHY: Location matters. Remote or distinct territories are harder for metropolises to control, creating openings for secession.
- ON ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE: Economic stakes shape resistance. Territories rich in oil, minerals, or trade routes face harsher retention efforts.

Therefore, a movement who does not face significant repression, does not attract the interest of outside actors, is internally divided (based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, etc...), is located closer to the metropole, and is not economically significant to the territory will likely not succeed.

Table 2 and figure 1 are a more contemporary demonstration of the way that states act, and which methods are more popular in today's legal and political context. This research has found that:

- 1) States rely most on military/basing power and legal/administrative frameworks. All territories made use of military power, even including as a threat in the background to quiet and divide independence movements (as is the case for New Caledonia)
- 2) Chagos shows how forced displacement weakens local mobilization, while Western Sahara and New Caledonia use settler integration to retain control.
- 3) Once military bases or geopolitical interests are entrenched, parent states double down on control rather than concede independence.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the ability of metropolises to retain control over overseas territories depends on a combination of military strength, legal and institutional tools, population management, and the ability to exploit internal divisions within movements. Subsequently, this research has also found that independence movements that combined strong internal unity with external recognition and support were far more likely to succeed, despite the metropole's strategies. Analyzing all 20th century successful independence movements of Bangladesh, Eritrea, Kosovo, and South Sudan illustrates that while repression and divide-and-rule tactics can delay independence, they rarely eliminate the underlying grievances that drive separatism. However, those movements which build legitimacy at home and abroad, through diplomacy, resource mobilization, and/or alignment with great power interests, were ultimately able to overcome the metropole's strategies of control. This suggests that independence struggles are best understood as dynamic interactions between internal cohesion, external support, and state responses.

Acknowledgements

I am truly honored and grateful from the bottom of my heart to have been selected by the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation. Thank you to the U of T Laidlaw Scholars Programme, my biggest thank you to Tyler Thom, You Jia Lee, and Shraddha Prasad for giving me an opportunity to see what it is like to conduct my own research and invest time into something I am truly fascinated by. I hope to only go up and create and learn wonderful things with the program.

Thank you to my research advisor, Dr. David Hughes, for his guidance and for encouraging me to make this project my own independent work – I have learned so much from this process. Thank you to all the professors I have talked to from my journey then to now. Thank you to the alumni of the program who were so generous to spare me time and advice, I am so lucky to have had the ability to personally get to know and talk to you.

And finally, to the people that have had the biggest impact on me, and my biggest supporters: my parents, grandparents and wider family for all their support and encouragement throughout the years; my partner, for your absolute help; and my friends for sitting through my talking about how much this means to me. Your support came in many different forms, and in all I am so grateful for it. You are all so wonderful.