

# Territorialisation, Patronage and Meddling: How Does Great Power Competition Impact Territorial Autonomy?

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## Abstract

How is great power competition today relevant to territorial autonomies? The competition between established and rising powers has implications for all political actors across the world, including territorial autonomies. However, the interaction between the rivalry among the great powers and the politics of territorial autonomies has been seldom scrutinised, at least not when addressing the early XXIst century. This commentary proposes three points where these topics connect: the territorialisation of foreign policy, patronage and networking, and meddling and unsettling conflict. By raising these points, this commentary aims to spark a new discussion on how territorial autonomy and international relations at the global level interact in the current era.

## Keywords

Territorial autonomy, great powers, international relations, paradiplomacy

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*The rules-based international order and multilateral system are prerequisites for global security, and the Åland Convention is a part of this fabric.*

Sauli Niinistö, President of Finland,  
on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the autonomous statute of the Åland Islands<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

There has been a revived interest in the International Relations sub-discipline in the past few years for the notion of ‘great power competition’.<sup>2</sup> Propelled by policy interest and perceived changes in the international system (the rise of China, the relative decline of the United States<sup>3</sup>), scholars have scrutinised this concept from a variety of perspectives and sought its applicability in a variety of areas. The guiding notion is that great power competition is an endemic although fluctuating feature of international relations, pitting the great powers of the time in a contest for supremacy. Great power status draws from different sources. Tudor Onea proposes three. To be a great power, a country must have a global reach, a disposition to engage in administrative tasks of international relations, and enjoy international recognition – especially from established great powers – as being a great power.<sup>4</sup> The intensity and scope of this competition varies, but its unique features that differentiates it from other international conflicts – the high stakes, and the involvement and ambition of the great powers – is persistent.<sup>5</sup> In the current moment, supranational entities such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), have been put under pressure to adapt to this new high ebb of great power competition, and assert their agency.<sup>6</sup> Defence alliances, such as NATO, have also had to adapt in order to demonstrate their continued relevance and cohesiveness.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this commentary is to draw attention to the relevance of great power competition to territorial autonomy.<sup>8</sup> While the literature has approached territorial autonomy as an international and internationalised phenomenon, its approach to the global- or systemic-level factors is fragmentary, and mostly focused on globalisation. In this commentary, I make the case that great power competition is relevant to territorial autonomy as a phenomenon connected to global affairs. The guiding question is: how does

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1 Niinistö 2022.

2 For an overview of the discussion of this concept, see DiCicco & Onea 2023.

3 E.g., Grano 2023.

4 Onea 2020, chapter 2.

5 Here I allude to the definition offered by DiCicco & Onea 2023.

6 Here, for instance, see Beeson 2022.

7 See Larsen 2022.

8 The reverse, the relevance of territorial autonomy to great power competition, is not explored here, although some of the ideas raised here could apply that way too.

great power competition impact territorial autonomy? Since this is not a research paper, I do not aim to answer this question, but to offer some thoughts into what could be relevant to its solution. So, given space limitations, the argument remains schematic.

In the following commentary, I draw a broad outline of how the global level of international relations is relevant for territorial autonomy. The argument pivots from the notion that the formation and shaping of territorial autonomy frequently interacts with the international system and the great powers shaping it. This commentary proposes three connecting topics or linkages between the two subjects: territorialisation, patronage, and meddling. In presenting each one, I will also offer tentative examples and a series of questions on these specific linkages between territorial autonomy and great power competition. My aim with this commentary is to stimulate a discussion on great power politics and their role in the creation and shaping of politics in territorial autonomies.

## **2. Territorial autonomy and the international system**

The interactions between territorial autonomies and the international system can be framed in two broad areas, drawing from the two sub-disciplines of Political Science: Comparative Politics and International Relations. Regarding the former, there is a body of literature concerning the impact of international politics on the internal configurations (statutes, politics) of territorial autonomies. For example, the coexistence of EU law with the autonomy statutes of the Åland Islands and South Tyrol has been scrutinised in the past.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the latter, I turn to the literature on sub-state international relations (also sometimes called ‘paradiplomacy’), to frame the interactions between territorial autonomies and the international system. This body of work has analysed how territorial autonomies interact with foreign partners. An example are the functioning and politics around the foreign representations opened by the governments of territorial autonomies. In Brussels, for instance, there are over 200 representations of sub-state governments, including all territorial autonomies in Europe and many beyond Europe.<sup>10</sup> This has attracted the attention of scholars of paradiplomacy and multi-level governance, analysing the phenomenon from various perspectives.<sup>11</sup> Outside of Europe, as an example, the foreign activities of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq have received some attention within the paradiplomacy literature.<sup>12</sup>

9 Among others, Stephan 2010; Woelk 2016. For a comparative approach, see Stephan 2017.

10 Huyseune & Jans 2008, 1. A more recent non-official source puts the number at over 300 representations. “Regional Representations,” Brussels Commissioner for Europe and International Organisations website, <https://www.commissioner.brussels/en/i-am-an-organisation/regional-representations> (accessed 27 March 2023).

11 For example, Tatham 2013.

12 See, among others, Charountak 2010; Mohammed & Owtram 2014.

These diverse perspectives on the international relations of sub-state regions have many times included broader global dynamics and international actors, but seldom systemic, global-level dimensions. There are dispersed references to the role of the League of Nations and the United Nations in the formation and functioning of autonomy statutes. In the case of the former, minority protection was integrated into the post-First World War collective security system. For instance, Carpathian Ruthenia in inter-war Czechoslovakia was granted territorial autonomy by the Treaty of St. Germain (1919), with signatories from the Allied powers. The statute however was implemented gradually, and full autonomy operated only in 1938.<sup>13</sup> The Cold War, for instance, overlaid the bi-polar dynamics of the time over regional and domestic politics throughout the world. This included the territorial autonomies existing at the time. For example, in the aftermath of the Second World War, South Tyrol found itself part of the emerging East-West borderland, near Yugoslavia and the Free Territory of Trieste. This location rendered the appearance of ethno-nationalist terrorism in the region and the underlying dissatisfaction with the early autonomy statute into a topic for security cooperation between Italy and post-occupation Austria.<sup>14</sup>

Looking beyond the Cold War, globalisation has been a frequent topic in the study of sub-state territorial entities, including territories with an autonomous status.<sup>15</sup> However, great power competition and its implications are topics of growing relevance when addressing the global level of international relations. Today, rivalry between China, Russia and the United States is a common feature of the scholarly literature on and media reporting of international affairs. Today, territories with a formal autonomy status find themselves at the forefront of these great power politics, such as the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.<sup>16</sup> In the following section, I suggest three linkages or points of contact between territorial autonomy and great power competition.

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13 Henders, Boulden, Kymlicka 2015, 272.

14 For an overview of South Tyrol history during the Cold War, see Steininger 2017, 77–96. On the cooperation between Austria and Italy, see Di Fabio 2022.

15 E.g., Cornago 2010.

16 Russia and China are sanctioned internationally over their respective policies in these two formally autonomous territories. Russia is sanctioned over its 2014 forceful takeover of Ukraine's sovereign territory of Crimea, and China is sanctioned over its human rights violations targeting Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. On Xinjiang and great power politics, see Grano 2023, 14.

### **3. Territorial autonomy and great power politics today: three connecting points**

Drawing from the emerging ‘third generation’ hegemonic studies,<sup>17</sup> I propose three points where the interest in territorial autonomy and great power competition meet. These are: territorialisation, patronage, and meddling. Some of these points are applicable to all sub-state governments, so I highlight the ways they especially concern territorial autonomy. For each point I raise a few questions relevant to the specificity of a territory having an autonomous status.

#### **3.1 The territorialisation of foreign policy**

For sub-state regions, the country’s overall foreign policy has implications. Governors are required to implement country-wide policies on the regions they govern. Frequently, these country-wide policies respond to international circumstances, in what can be called the regionalisation or territorialisation of foreign policy. For all sub-state regions, this imperative demands a response to the local conditions, politics, and structures. For territorial autonomies in particular, the regionalisation of foreign policy is less straightforward. Their autonomous statute might give their local governments a wider margin to negotiate the territorialisation of foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> This renders territorialisation into a potentially open-ended process, or even a source of centre-region divergence. For instance, EU membership was not implemented (regionalised) on the territorial autonomies of member states without special consultations and provisions. Territorial autonomies have also left the EU, most recently Greenland (1985). Others did not join when their country entered the EU, such as the Faroe Islands in Denmark’s case.<sup>19</sup>

Great power competition – inasmuch it is a phenomenon with global implications – demands attention from all countries in the world. In many cases, more than attention, this competition demands adjustments in foreign policy, sometimes necessitating the territorialisation of foreign policy decisions. Upon Finland submitting its request to join NATO, the demilitarised status of the Åland Islands became a topic of discussion, albeit in the end the status did not impede, hinder, or slow down the application and accession process.<sup>20</sup> Framing the territorialisation of foreign policy in the context of great power competition presents questions concerning the role of autonomous statutes today: how does the political leadership of territorial autonomies see the role of the great powers of the moment?

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17 Ikenberry & Nexon 2019.

18 On territorialisation, see Kuznetsov 2014; Duran 2015.

19 Rebhan 2022.

20 Vanttinen 2023.

### 3.2 Patronage and networking

International patronage refers to the phenomenon of countries patronising foreign actors. Patronage involves great power influence over another country's (the client's) domestic politics and ruling coalitions. Great powers deploy a mixture of coercive means to discipline their clients and incentives to facilitate cooperation. In turn, the client adopts the patron's regime type and becomes generally loyal to the patron. In the context of great power politics, patronage is a key element in the creation and maintenance of hegemonic orders. The goal of this patronage is to establish a network of compliant partners across the world that operate and facilitate emerging normative and political orders.<sup>21</sup>

Great powers engaging and cultivating contacts among the political leadership in sub-state regions is a known phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> Yet, cases of great power patronage in territorial autonomies have been studied less frequently.<sup>23</sup> Some documented cases suggest that great powers have patronised governing authorities within territorial autonomies. For instance, Cantir shows how Moscow influences the political leadership of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia to oppose Moldova's bid to EU membership. A traditionally Russophile region, Gagauzia's leadership has advocated for Moldova's Eurasian integration over European integration, while Moscow has hailed Comrat's support as evidence of popular support for Eurasian projects. Through elite contacts and bypassing Moldovan authorities, Moscow has cultivated its Gagauzia network, counting on it as a source of support in Moldova.<sup>24</sup>

Another potential example – although concerning specifically a territorial autonomy created partly due to pressure from a great power – is the Magyar Autonomous Region, which existed in Romania between 1952 and 1968. Under Stalin's overbearing sway over the Warsaw Pact, Moscow pressured Romania to adopt a Soviet-style internal administration, replacing the traditional county (*judet*) for the Soviet-style regions and districts (*oblast* and *raion*). Part of this change involved creating a territorial autonomy for the Transylvanian Hungarian-speaking community, previously living under counties. The system changed again back to the previous system in 1968.<sup>25</sup> In this case, the great power – the Soviet Union – compelled a client state to create a new autonomous territory.

Cases of direct patronage such as Gagauzia or involvement such as the Magyar Autonomous Region might not be common or well documented. They do however demonstrate the potential for great power patronage in and around the politics of territorial

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21 Seva Gunitsky 2014.

22 For example, the Chinese Communist Party wages influence operations at the level of state governments in the United States. Hamilton & Ohlberg 2020, chapter 5.

23 Within the paradiplomacy literature, a ground-breaking study on the topic is Cantir 2015.

24 Cantir 2015, 273, 281.

25 The autonomy was officially called the Mureş-Magyar Autonomous Region between 1960 and 1968. See Bottoni 2018.

autonomies; either among the authorities of the territorial autonomies themselves or in the creation of an autonomous status. Cases such as these raise several questions. What safeguards are offered by territorial autonomy to prevent or cope with attempts of great powers to patronise local politicians?

### 3.3 Meddling and unsettling conflict

Many territorial autonomies have been created to manage or settle long-standing conflicts between countries, between centre and periphery, and between the groups residing within and around the territories.<sup>26</sup> Great powers might seek to exploit the underlying conflict found in some territorial autonomies. Instances have been found where secessionist sentiments are exploited and protodiplomacy is encouraged.<sup>27</sup> An example of a great power encouraging *secessionism* inside a territorial autonomy are Russia's covert actions in Catalonia. In Catalonia, the Russian government intervened in the 2017 independence referendum in favour of the independentist movement. Support for them came in the shape of promises of Russian funds for establishing the would-be independent Catalonia, and disinformation campaigns meant to affect the results of the referendum.<sup>28</sup> An example of a great power encouraging *protodiplomacy* among territorial autonomies has been China's approach to Bougainville post-referendum. Bougainville, a territorial autonomy in Papua New Guinea, held an independence referendum in 2019, which set the prospect for independence in the 2020s. Despite the referendum, the politics of Bougainvillean independence remain fraught, with authorities in Port Moresby holding a reportedly ambiguous attitude on the subject.<sup>29</sup> China has demonstrated an interest in Bougainville as a potential security partner and a member of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since the referendum, China has engaged Bougainville with hopes that, after independence, the new country will not recognise Taiwan.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the similarities in the context of the moves by China and Russia in these two cases, the differences might render these into two analytically distinct phenomena. In Catalonia, Russia acted covertly, and in favour of a specific position (independence) in a controversial, legally questionable referendum vote. In Bougainville, China acted overtly (at least after 2019) and with counterparts in the legitimate authorities seeking the region's independence. In sum, my suggestion here is that great powers may approach territorial

26 There is a long literature on territorial autonomy as a conflict management strategy.

27 Protodiplomacy is different from paradiplomacy. The latter refers to the international relations of substate regions. The former refers to the international relations of sub-state regions that seek to or are preparing to become independent. See Cornago 2018.

28 Baquero et al 2022.

29 Brucker 2022.

30 Reportedly, China did offer an incentive for independence in 2018. See Knotter 2023.

autonomies for their subjacent conflicts. What might be unique is not conflict per se but the emerging triangle between territorial autonomy, conflict, and great power meddling. This suggestion raises several questions. Do great powers perceive territorial autonomies as particularly attractive for meddling due to the potential for unsettling conflict? Do autonomous statutes offer unique resources to cope with pressure from foreign powers, especially in the background of pervasive conflict?

#### **4. Closing remarks**

The purpose of this commentary is to point to the relevance of great power competition to territorial autonomy. This commentary does not offer a definitive conclusion or answer to the question ‘how does great power competition impact territorial autonomy?’ Following the literature on the international relations of territorial autonomies and the literature on hegemonic studies, I propose three connecting points or linkages: the territorialisation of foreign policy in the context of great power rivalry, great power patronage, and meddling and unsettling conflict. In addition, I have presented several questions to discuss further the interaction of territorial autonomy and great power competition. This comment proposes these three points more as leads for future research. More broadly, the relevance of the global level of politics deserves additional scrutiny when approaching territorial autonomy. Globalisation and continental integration are key phenomena that connect sub-state governments to the global level of international relations. But there are other global phenomena that can play a role in shaping territorial autonomy, its formation, and even its concrete political agenda.

The purpose of this commentary is to suggest that territorial autonomy might suffice to create a ‘separate space’<sup>31</sup> within national politics, but not in global politics. As the quote at the beginning points to, territorial autonomy is, in fact, part of an international normative order. But normative orders change constantly, and sometimes they change in response to conflictual dynamics in international politics. Following this thought, I have highlighted the relevance of great power competition for the politics of territorial autonomy. In proposing several linkages or points of contact, this paper hints at the multiple aspects of great power competition that are relevant for territorial autonomies specifically. Territorialisation and patronage hint at the relevance of territorial autonomy in broader foreign policy shifts. Meddling hints at the relevance of territorial autonomy in the constitution of diverse societies and countries. So, exploring how great power competition is relevant to territorial autonomy could refine our understanding of the international

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31 To use the phrase by Hanks (2000) when referring to the ambiguous autonomy of Karakalpakstan.



relations of territorial autonomies as opposed to other types of authorities ‘below’ the level of the nation-state.

There are caveats to add, preventing a full conclusion to this commentary. First, much empirical research is needed to fill the gaps in our knowledge. For example, new case studies, especially beyond the ‘Global North’, could shed light on the perceptions, politics, and policies of autonomous governments in light of great power competition. Then, none of these proposed points can be taken at this stage as fully formed hypotheses, as that would require a more comprehensive literature review in the framework of a research project. In that sense, this comment proposes these three points more as ‘leads’ for future research. Finally, for each linkage, I have presented several questions to discuss further the interaction of autonomy and global politics. These are not meant to be research questions *stricto sensu* either.

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