National Self-determination

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A. DEFINITIONS

The principle of **national self-determination**, like all abstract political terms, has in the course of time undergone changes in meaning and connotation. Its core meaning remains 'the belief that each nation has a right to constitute an independent state and determine its own government.'

This definition begs the question: What exactly is a nation?

A **'nation'** is a group of people who share a significant number (but by means necessarily all) of the following attributes: history, language, ethnic origin, religion, political belief, fear of the same adversaries. In short, a nation may be defined as 'a community that is, or wishes to be, a state.'

> (The above quotations are from Alfred Cobban, *The Nation State and National Self-Determination*, rev. edn. 1969, pp. 39 and 108.)

Frequently the terms **'self-determination'** and **'self-determination of peoples'** have been used synonymously with 'national self-determination'. However, these two terms can also have broader and vaguer meanings, not necessarily associated with separate sovereign statehood for each nation.

B. KEY QUOTATIONS

The **Declaration of Independence of the United States** (1776) contained a classic expression of the principle of self-determination: 'When in the course of Human Events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another...'

Exiled revolutionary **V.I. Lenin**, in his 1915 paper on *The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-determination*, wrote in the name of the Russian proletariat: 'We demand freedom of self-determination, i.e. independence, i.e. freedom of separation for the oppressed nations, not because we have dreamt of splitting up the country economically, or of the ideal of small states, but, on the contrary, because we want large states and the closer unity and even fusion of nations, but on a truly democratic, truly internationalist basis, which is *inconceivable* without the freedom to separate.'

US President **Woodrow Wilson**, Address at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress, 11 February 1918: '"Self-determination" is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril ...'

US Secretary of State, **Robert Lansing**, on 30 December 1918: 'The phrase is simply loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives.'

The **UN Charter**, Article 1(2), refers to 'equal rights and self-determination of peoples'.

The **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** (1966), Article 1, paragraph 1: 'All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.' Identical wording appears in the parallel International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1993), Article 3, states: 'Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-determination.'

UN Secretary-General **Boutros Boutros-Ghali** stated in his otherwise upbeat 1992 report *An Agenda for Peace*: 'The United Nations has not closed its door. Yet if every ethnic, religious or linguistic group claimed statehood, there would be no limit to fragmentation, and peace, security and well-being for all would become ever more difficult to achieve.'

C. STRENGTHS OF THE PRINCIPLE

The principle of national self-determination, which gained popular political currency in nineteenth century Europe, played a major part in the unification of Italy as well as that of Germany at that time. It was by no means been wholly negative in twentieth-century history. Large imperial systems are inherently unstable, leading to strong pressure for self-rule in their constituent parts. At times when great empires have been threatened with defeat and collapse, as in Europe after two world wars, the principle has been commonly advocated as a basis for a new and better order. The principle has helped to shape the responses of major powers to the break-up of empires; and it has provided a framework within which the attainment of national aspirations was assumed to encompass self-determination in the form of democratic institutions.

D. WEAKNESSES OF THE PRINCIPLE

The principle of national self-determination has no authoritative exegesis. There has been a lack of clarity as to which 'peoples' or 'nations' are its bearers and supposed beneficiaries. Peoples are simply not arranged conveniently on the map in a way that makes their formation into states possible without disasters. Some of the most deplorable features of twentieth-century history – including the pursuit of irredentist claims, the emergence of dictatorships in post-colonial states, and the cruel treatment of minorities – can in part be attributed to the principle and its defects. Problems relating to the principle were involved, directly or indirectly, in the causation of the overwhelming majority of conflicts in the twentieth century, including two world wars. The principle has always been contested, and not only by the European colonial powers. At best it is only one principle among many, and needs to be balanced against other values and tempered by other considerations.

E. NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION SINCE 1988

On 1 January 1988 there were 159 member states of the United Nations. Today there are 191. The great majority of the 32 new members (Switzerland is the exception that proves the rule) are countries that have recently emerged to new sovereign statehood, or regained a statehood that was lost earlier. The principle has assisted these states in their emergence from long periods of external control. Examples include Namibia (formerly ruled by South Africa); the republics of the former Soviet Union; the republics of the former Yugoslavia (with the solitary and partial exception of Montenegro; and East Timor (under Indonesian rule from 1975 to 1999)

'National self-determination' remains powerful as a battle-cry for political and military action, but it has not been advocated in the 1990s as a theory for international order or as a possible path to international peace. The movements towards self-determination in the 1990s have taken place without the benefit of high-profile general advocacy of the idea by leading statesmen. In many cases (e.g. in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union) wars ensued. The claims of certain peoples to self-determination are still greeted mainly by an embarrassed silence from the international community: the cases of Chechnya and Tibet illustrate the point.

Can traditional conceptions of self-determination develop – indeed, are they developing – into something less disaster-prone? Elements of change include: acceptance of existing frontiers; emphasis on multi-ethnicity; acceptance of a variety of arrangements for the international political status of territories; and the pre-eminence of the right to democracy.

F. READING

On the 30-page reading list for International Relations (214), see particularly the items marked as specially recommended (**) for topic 7, 'Self-determination and Nationalism' (i.e. on pp. 17-18), and also for the Yugoslavia section of topic 6 (i.e. on pp. 16-17).

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(a) Strongly recommended:

Cobban, Alfred. The Nation State and National Self-Determination (rev. edn. 1969).

Kedourie, Elie, Nationalism (4th ed. 1993); or chapter in Adam Watson and Hedley Bull (eds.), The Expansion of International Society (pbk. 1985).

Seton-Watson, Hugh, Nations and States (1977).

Shehadi, Kamal S., Ethnic Self-Determination and the Break-up of States, IISS Adelphi Paper no. 283 (December 1993).

(b) Further reading:

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities* (1983).

Berlin, Isaiah, 'Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power' in *Against the Current* (1979).

Cassese, Antonio, *Self-Determination of Peoples: A Legal Reappraisal* (1995).

Clark, Donald, and Robert Williamson (eds.), *Self-Determination: International Perspectives* (1996).

Crawford, James, *The Creation of States in International Law* (1979).*

Daedalus, Special Issue, 'Reconstructing Nations and States' (Summer 1993).

Franck, Thomas, *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations* (1990), especially pp.153-174; or Rosalyn Higgins, *Problems and Process. International Law and How We Use it* (1994), chapter 7 ('Self Determination'); or Michla Pomerance, *Self-determination in Law and Practice* (1982).

Gellner, Ernest, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983).

Greenfield, Liah, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992).

Hobsbawm, Eric, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (1990).

Ignatieff, Michael, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (1994), especially Introduction.

Kamenka, E. (ed.), *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (1976).

Mayall, James, *Nationalism and International Society* (1989).

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick, *Pandaemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (1993).*

Pomerance, Michla, *Self-Determination in Law and Practice: The New Doctrine in the United Nations* (1982).

Posen, Barry, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', *Survival* (Spring 1993), reprinted in Michael E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (1994) (see also the chapter by Jack Snyder).

Smith, Anthony, *Theories of Nationalism* (2nd edn. 1983).

Smith, Anthony, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (pbk.edn. 1988).

Sureda, Rigo, *The Evolution of the Right of Self-Determination: A Study of United Nations Practice* (1973).*

Tomuschat, Christian (ed.), *Modern Law of Self-Determination* (1993).*

Walzer, Michael, 'The Reform of the State System' in O. Østerud (ed.), *Studies of War and Peace* (1987).

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