



Focus #6: Backfire Risks

Well-intentioned efforts to reduce violent conflict can backfire in predictable ways. It is vital to learn and apply these lessons to avoid repeating past mistakes.

Propaganda

States and rebel groups sometimes engage in propaganda to win international sympathy by falsely accusing the other side of crimes, as documented by Honig and Reichard (2018). When the international community is duped, it may intervene in ways that unintentionally exacerbate violence, reward deception, and assist malicious actors. This problem is especially prevalent when the disinformation aligns with interveners' biases. One way to mitigate this pathology is to avoid precipitous actions, such as the U.S.-led military intervention in Libya in 2011, which was launched barely one month into the conflict on the basis of dubious claims of impending genocide (Kuperman, 2013). Another prophylactic is to employ Red Teams to vet claims made by conflict parties and news media. However, outright censorship can be counter-productive by also blocking lifesaving information. Facebook discovered this in 2019, when it shut accounts linked to Myanmar rebel groups, and human rights groups complained that it deprived them of crucial intelligence about at-risk civilians (Fisher and Taub, 2019).

Key Points

- Intervention based on fake news may reward deception and escalate violence, so it is vital to vet media claims and avoid rushed decisions, despite political pressure.
- Granting regional autonomy to appease the grievance of a minority group may facilitate secessionist war – by bolstering the group's identity and ability to mobilize violence.
- Sanctioning a developing country for ostensible human rights violations, which actually are justifiable efforts to build a strong state, may weaken the government and make it vulnerable to civil war that could inflict much more harm on civilians.
- Pressuring countries to rapidly liberalize their politics, economy, and media can exacerbate inter-group grievances that lead to violence, so gradual reform is safer.

Regional Autonomy

A common prescription to prevent civil war – granting political autonomy to regionally concentrated ethnic groups – is also one of the most perilous. The logic of this approach is to reduce grievance that could trigger rebellion (Gurr, 2000). However, regional autonomy also exacerbates other factors that may facilitate rebellion: identity salience, mobilization capacity, and political opportunity (since the state is weakened). The most elegant study of this dynamic, by Cornell (2002), examined nine ethnic enclaves in the Caucasus, of which four were randomly granted regional autonomy by the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. Five decades later, when the Soviet Union disintegrated, only the four autonomous enclaves launched secessionist rebellions – and three succeeded (Figure 1). A lesson is that although autonomy might sometimes avert civil violence in the short run, it appears to foster secessionist war in the long run.

Liberalizing Too Quickly

International pressure to liberalize a country's political and economic institutions may unintentionally promote violent conflict, as Paris (2001) explains. For example, scheduling elections soon after a peace deal exacerbates political polarization and bolsters extremist candidates. Economic liberalization – including cutting state jobs and subsidies, and eliminating trade protection from foreign imports – can fuel at least short-term unemployment and inflation that amplify grievances. A safer post-war approach is to delay elections in favor of transitional power-sharing for several years until fear and resentment recede (Kuperman, 2015a), and to pursue only gradual economic reform. Media privatization also should be incremental, to guard against incendiary messaging.

Figure 1. Regional Autonomy Fosters Secession

Ethnic Enclaves	Territorial Autonomy (1920s-30s)	Violent Secession (1990s)
Armenians (Azerbaijan)	✓	✓
Abkhaz (Georgia)	✓	✓
S. Ossetians (Georgia)	✓	✓
Ajars (Georgia)	✓	
Azeris (Armenia)		
Lezgins (Azerbaijan)		
Talysh (Azerbaijan)		
Armenians (Georgia)		
Azeris (Georgia)		

Source: Cornell (2002).

Human Rights Sanctions

Historically, the creation of successful states – which can extract resources, provide services, and establish a national identity – has required a degree of coercion. Today, however, the international community may sanction developing countries for human rights violations if they employ such coercion. This perpetuates weak states, making them vulnerable to civil war that could inflict much more harm on civilians, according to Ayoob (2006). To protect human rights in the long run, the international community should consider tolerating in the short run coercive measures by developing states that are legitimately aimed at state-building.