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 Edited by Jacques Bertrand and Andre Laliberte  
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I

Introduction

Jacques Bertrand and André Laliberté

Multination states have been unstable. The presence of more than one group seeking status as a “nation” within the boundaries of a single state has given rise to strong tensions that have generally been difficult to overcome.<sup>1</sup> The means by which these tensions are addressed and the instruments available for seeking compromises between states and such groups largely determine the extent to which violence can be avoided.

In the worst cases, the world has witnessed long periods of violent conflict. The breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the subsequent war, as well as the long-standing conflict in Sri Lanka are two of the most glaring examples. More often than not, one group gains control of the state and imposes its own view of an overarching national identity. This is rejected by the other group, which sees itself as a distinct nation. The conflict often takes the form of a sub-state nationalist movement against the state, but in reality it reflects intense disagreements based on competing nationalist visions. While one group may make strong claims that the state represents a single nation that can be defined inclusively, it may clash with a group within the state that refuses to be encapsulated within

<sup>1</sup> We use the following criteria to identify nations: (i) groups that have some sort of awareness as belonging to a sovereign people, and aspire to (or have) a form of self-determination; we do not include groups that simply do not see themselves as a people and who display no evidence of seeking self-determination; (ii) most often the latter implies that there is a political organization for this purpose, and that there is some good level of support for this conception of the group, at least at the elite level. This being said, in many cases, popular support or awareness is not necessarily very widespread. As a result, we are thinking of it as a political process as well (nationalism), by which the group or the state is seeking to promote the idea of a nation (coincidental with existing boundaries of the state, or with a smaller political unit).

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that vision. As happened in Sri Lanka, such a single nation might even exclude a group entirely by defining itself in cultural, exclusivist terms. The particular structure of competing claims and the forms they take may vary, but they result when at least two groups seek recognition and status as nations.

Multination states are thus states in which more than one group seeks equal status and recognition as a constitutive member, usually making claims to self-determination. The constitutive members are nations in that they seek a state, or representation within a state, that gives them powers of self-determination either in the form of autonomy or federalism or through power-sharing arrangements based on equality with the other constitutive nations. Although the term multination state sometimes carries a normative dimension, it is used here strictly as a descriptive category denoting the presence of more than one group seeing themselves as nations within a single state.

Aside from violence, conflict between nations has often been addressed by compromise, negotiation, and accommodation. Federations have often been built on the notion of two or more nations creating common institutions while retaining large jurisdictional areas under each nation's control, in the form of self-government for each of the constitutive members. Certainly, at its origins, the Canadian federation had some of these features. More recent forms, such as that of Belgium, have evolved into such an understanding. Federalism, however, is only one form of compromise and accommodation. A more common form is territorial autonomy, which leads to devolution to one special region without equal decentralization across the board. In this case, nations seek equal status but may be up against a state controlled by a much larger group, making territorial autonomy the best available compromise. Other institutional forms of accommodation can also be achieved, such as power sharing in relatively centralized states or the creation of specific jurisdictional areas of exclusive control.

Regardless of the form that accommodation may take or the violent outcomes that may arise, multination states face similar structures of conflict. Their existence poses a fundamental challenge to the idea of the homogenous nation-state, or to its emulation. After World War I, the Westphalian nation-state system created a standard upholding the notion that each state represented a single, relatively cohesive nation. Where this was absent, such a nation needed to be built either on the basis of a common cultural heritage or on the basis of shared

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political principles. Compounded by the League of Nations' adoption of the right to self-determination of nations, the movement toward making the boundaries of states and of nations coincide became increasingly strong. In the European context, this meant the redrawing of boundaries after the demise of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires to create states representing single nations. Later, during the decades of decolonization, leaders of the new states promoted "official nationalist" projects (Anderson 1991), by which they sought to unify culturally and ethnically diverse populations around the notion of a single, unified nation.

Attempts at nation-building were accompanied by endeavours to build strong, centralized states. Although these are parallel processes, they were mostly distinct efforts. Building strong states entailed the establishment of executive capacity, including cohesive and responsive bureaucracies, militaries, and police forces to secure the state's borders, establish internal order, and create the capacity to formulate and implement policies. In many states, centralization was deemed to be the best means of achieving these objectives, and state leaders sought to create unified, homogenous nations on which state foundations could lie. The accommodation of ethnic minorities or groups contesting single-nation status was considered to be a potential source of state disintegration or weakness at best.

It is against this backdrop that more recent trends need to be considered. Whereas past emphases on nation-building were accompanied by policies designed to integrate and assimilate various groups into a common core, in recent decades the array of policies has changed quite dramatically. Although sometimes retained as primary policies, integration and assimilation have become much less common. Instead, accommodation of minorities and the establishment of alternative means of representation have become relatively widespread in such varied places as the United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, India, and even several Latin-American countries. Some states have accommodated diversity by adopting a set of policies known as "multiculturalism," denoting a specific approach to accommodation of ethnic minorities arising primarily from immigration (Kymlicka 1995). Indigenous peoples have been increasingly recognized and given special status in Latin America and elsewhere. Failures to create stable, strongly centralized states also led to widespread use of decentralization as a strategy, mainly for more effective governance but with some important consequences in terms of group representation and accommodation.

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Sub-state nationalist groups,<sup>2</sup> however, have not been as easily accommodated. The exceptions include the United Kingdom, where the Scots and Welsh were given new representative institutions and powers of autonomy; Canada, where the Québécois exercise considerable group power through provincial institutions; and Belgium, where the central state gave way to a highly decentralized federation between the Flemish and the Walloon nations. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, of course, decided to peacefully secede in order to create an independent state for each nation. In other places, sub-state nationalist groups have been denied accommodation. Corsicans have no special status within France, nor do the Kurds in Turkey. The Tamils have violently resisted the Sri Lankan state over its refusal to accommodate them. Although there has been a movement away from integration, assimilation, and state centralization, this trend has by no means been across the board and, where it has occurred, has certainly not led to great leaps in accommodating sub-state nationalist groups.

Similarly, many Asian states retain structures that assert the primacy of the unitary nation-state despite the fact that many groups claim or ask for recognition as nations within the state or seek secession. This premise is puzzling in this context. There clearly has been a trend elsewhere to move away from assimilationist and centralizing policies that were seen as perpetuating unstable outcomes. Yet the resistance to accommodation in Asia continues to be very strong. There have been some significant exceptions, such as in India, and some significant departures, such as in Indonesia, as well as some official forms of recognizing nations even if the recognition is not followed by substantive accommodation, such as in China. The result is a varied pattern of accommodating the idea of several nations within one state, with a generally weak tendency to do so. We collectively explore Asian states

<sup>2</sup> We distinguish a nation that is coincidental with the boundaries of the state from sub-state national groups (or sub-state nations) that do not have their own state. The latter usually seek, implicitly or explicitly, recognition as a “nation.” Seeking autonomy, federalism, or any special status, we think, demonstrates evidence of seeking recognition as a “nation,” usually alongside others with the same state, or even as a nation within the broader nation that encompasses the whole state (although more rarely the latter case). We have chosen to use sub-state nationalist rather than “ethnonationalist” groups as the latter assumes that nationalist mobilization below the state level is necessarily based on ethnic ties, in opposition to a more civic and inclusive form of nationalism that coincides with existing boundaries of the state. Analytically, we prefer a more neutral term to characterize nationalisms (or nations) below the state level, leaving for the analysis of each case, where relevant, a characterization of these nationalisms.

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to explain the circumstances under which some have accommodated sub-state national groups (usually implicitly) and the broader trend of resisting such accommodation. Asian cases provide a broad comparative pool that has been relatively neglected in comparative studies of these issues.

A bird's eye view of the region suggests that there is variance among countries on three counts. First, as mentioned previously, states differ in the extent to which they formally recognize nations within their boundaries. China, as well as other formally socialist states, institutionalizes this recognition in its constitution, declaring itself a "unitary *multinational* state." Other states recognize groups in ethnic terms but do not distinguish nations from other ethnic groups. For instance the Indian federation is organized around linguistic groups, but makes no distinction between groups that see themselves as nations, and those that don't. Some states give recognition implicitly in the form of autonomy while not recognizing nations explicitly (Indonesia, Philippines). Second, states vary in the ways they have responded to the claims made by groups asking for recognition as nations. Some states have accommodated such groups by granting them territorial autonomy and/or by adopting policies that allow the pursuit of their interests. These same states have sometimes reversed these policies and repressed these groups. The sequence of responses, or the contradictions in some of these responses, has created varied patterns of resistance. Third, even among states that have appeared to accommodate sub-state nationalist groups, not all have followed through on their commitments.

We analyze collectively this varied pattern of recognition and accommodation. We have been guided by the following set of questions: Why have some states departed from the homogeneous nation-state concept, and why have most not done so? Have different historical trajectories or differences in the construction and origins of nationalist movements had a strong impact on today's differences among Asian states in their accommodation of sub-state national groups? Why? Have changes to accommodate national minorities led to *actual* empowerment of nations within the state? For states that give with one hand, while taking away with the other, what are the consequences of adopting discourses or giving symbolic recognition to nations while denying them real power? Although we do not claim to answer these questions exhaustively, our comparative analysis of Asian cases has yielded some general patterns and trends that we outline in our conclusion.

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## NATIONS, STATES, AND MULTINATIONALITY

Multination states have often been unstable because state boundaries or self-definitions of inclusiveness have been contested by sub-state national groups advancing their own claims to nationhood. Multination states defy our common understanding of the classic nation-state, which embodies the principle of congruence between a state and a nation. A “nation” consists of a group of people that collectively see themselves as belonging to the same entity, whether or not this entity is defined by ethnic markers of identity such as language, religion, custom, or any other common cultural trait or by a shared sense of belonging shaped by historical experience. In other words, this definition of the single nation-state can include the kind of states that “ethnic” or “civic” nationalists seek to create (Greenfeld 1992). In this ideal type, the overwhelming majority of the population believes that it belongs to the same nation. Such a congruence between nation and state is achieved either through nation-building from the top, via assimilation into a dominant national core, or through the gradual integration of different peoples into a common national core. It can also be achieved through the secession of a national minority seeking to create its own state, or one that joins with a neighboring state that it perceives to be its homeland.

Clashes between groups with different conceptions of the nation and concomitant state boundaries have often had violent consequences. After the Cold War, such violence was evident in many countries of the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans. Several studies have rightly deplored this situation as a source of international instability, but they have tended to paint with the same brush both extreme nationalists who promoted “ethnic cleansing” and the nationalist movements that accepted moderate forms of accommodation on the part of existing states (see Snyder 2000).

In many countries, particularly democratic ones, the recognition and/or accommodation of several nations within the boundaries of a single state has not led to such conflict and disintegration. The diverse policies of recognition for nations within states, power-sharing mechanisms, devolution schemes, and proportional representation that have been adopted by European and North American states have accommodated differences, if not celebrated them, in the name of preserving the integrity of the existing political structure.

For newly democratic countries, accommodation may offer a path toward compromise that avoids violence, yet several states refuse to adopt

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such a path. This conundrum can be very significant for the future of democracy and can have disastrous consequences for stability. As Linz and Stepan (1996) have observed, democratic consolidation requires that questions of “stateness” be resolved in that all groups must recognize the legitimacy of the state’s boundaries. Where a group sees itself as a stateless nation, such a condition can lead to secessionist mobilization, particularly if it does not have the possibility of negotiating recognition and equal status. The question becomes how far can states move away from rigid conceptions of a “nation-state” – the idea that the nation should coincide with the existing boundaries of the state – without facing the disintegrative tendencies of excessive devolution toward extreme forms of multinationalism – in which several nations would be recognized and accommodated but without a strong loyalty or bond to the common state (Linz, Stepan, & Yadav 2007).

In spite of recent trends, including the possibility of more peaceful outcomes through the accommodation of sub-state national groups, the nation-state paradigm is resilient because it is rooted in strong historical tendencies. As scholars of the origins of nationalism, such as Anderson, have argued, the idea of a single nation coinciding with the boundaries of the state has been a very strong source of legitimacy in the modern state system. Originating in the Americas, nationalism spread to Europe and destroyed the old monarchies’ basis of rule. Epitomized by the French Revolution, nationalism created a new set of legitimating principles based on the principle of the modern state as being representative of a “nation.” Such nations were constructed out of shared experiences, languages, and sometimes, cultural traits. Acknowledging the power of this idea, monarchs even reinvented themselves as nationalists and used state power to construct nations from above, often through a state-induced process of vernacularization and reinvention of historical origins (Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983).

Against the backdrop of the nationalist models inspired by the French Revolution and by the experience of the Americas, two significant factors led to a trend toward the model of a unitary nation-state. First, nationalism spread from Europe to other parts of the world in the late nineteenth century, thanks to the transmission of ideas to the colonial elites, many of whom were influenced by the European view that the ideal modern political community was the nation-state. For nationalist leaders such as Sun Yat-sen, M. K. Gandhi, Sukarno, and Jommo Kenyatta, seeking national self-determination under colonial rule seemed the logical next step. Many of these leaders, however, understanding the heterogeneity of



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their societies within the colonial boundaries, tried to think of ways to develop a sense of shared national identity that would transcend the differences. Sun, lamenting that the “Chinese were like a loose heap of sand,” sought to encourage a Chinese patriotism that transcended regional identities (Sun 1924), whereas Nehru advocated a secular India that would overcome communal and linguistic cleavages. Once they achieved the goal of independence from imperial rulers or colonial powers, these leaders developed different forms of “official nationalisms,” in which they promoted “nation-building” strategies that nurtured a sense of shared destiny for every citizen within the existing boundaries defined by their former rulers. The “nations” created this way were mere facts of territorial demarcation and historical accident, but some of them were successfully grafted onto relatively strong nationalist movements that fought for independence and managed in that struggle to create a more or less cohesive sense of belonging to the same imagined community (Anderson 1991).

Second, after World War I, the emergence of the principle of self-determination gave the idea of convergence between nations and states a new sense of urgency. The breakup of the Central European empires encouraged movements that sought to recognize the right of European nations to obtain their own states in accordance with the norms of the Westphalian state system. This evolution, which led to the emergence of states such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, set a precedent that made the demands for self-determination in the colonies of Asia and Africa all the more pressing. The principle of self-determination proved a powerful source of inspiration for anti-colonial nationalist movements that Western colonial powers found increasingly difficult to resist. These movements sought independence from colonial powers on the basis of existing boundaries demarcated by foreign powers. The boundaries of the nation were defined by the state, not the other way around. These states were far from homogeneous culturally, and the challenge that most anti-colonial leaders faced was to manufacture overarching identities that could be shared by all citizens within the new political entities.

One significant exception to that trend was the Soviet Union. The new state had emerged before the end of World War I and Wilson’s promotion for the idea of self-determination of nations. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union created an unprecedented system of political-administrative units that were defined in national-territorial terms. It is unclear historically why this choice was made; nevertheless, it created a logic by which federal units replicated layers of party and state officials along ethnic lines, eventually laying the foundation for the emergence



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of new nationalist movements. Ironically, the Soviet Union, as well as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, strengthened, and sometimes even created, national identities by recognizing and extending official languages, promoting national educational curricula and culture, and constructing “native” elites. They also provided resources to build the administrative, economic, and political structures of states, thereby giving these national elites the levers of state power, albeit under a centralized umbrella state (Brubaker 1996; Bunce 1999, pp. 47–52; Roeder 1991).

In China, a similar logic prevailed. After the 1911 Revolution, Republican leaders wanted to preserve the territorial integrity of the empire they had inherited and therefore came up with the idea that the Republic of China was an association of peoples (Schiffman 1970). Similarly, to ensure during the Long March the neutrality of the non-Chinese people of the Western periphery while it fought the Republican regime, the armed guerrilla of the Communist Party promised that it would grant some form of recognition to the minorities after its eventual victory. Both the Republican regime and the Communist Party, then, either provided or promised an early form of multinational state at the symbolic level. The substance of that policy, however, could not be implemented because of the prevailing circumstances of political division, foreign invasion, and civil war during the Republican era (1911–1949) and because, once in power, the Communist Party was reluctant to encourage any policy that might threaten the country’s newfound national unity (Ghai 2000a, pp. 78–81; Mackerras 1994).

In sum, except for some European socialist states, the general thrust toward building and strengthening unitary nation-states was a powerful force throughout most of the twentieth century. Both European states and the decolonizing states of Asia, Africa, and Latin America espoused this model and engaged in homogenizing policies of nation-building to reach this goal.

## SUB-STATE NATIONALISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The strong centrifugal forces that created nation-states from below or above have met with significant resistance. Sub-state nationalist movements have emerged among groups that see themselves as distinct nations seeking their own state institutions. In multinational states, where at least one group claims nationhood alongside, or separate from, the dominant nation espoused by state elites, homogenizing tendencies have often led to violent resistance and conflict. Because they are territorially

TABLE 1.1. *Proportion of Sub-state National Groups Per Region*

Region	Western Democracies and Japan	Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa	Eastern Europe	North Africa and Middle East	Latin America and the Caribbean
Number of countries	21	23	43	26	19	23
Number of ethnic groups	79	126	362	120	74	90
Number of ethnonational groups (MAR) per region	5	15	4	6	4	0
% of countries per region that have ethnonational groups	19%	39%	9%	12%	21%	0%

Notes: Based on Minorities at Risk (MAR) data. We recoded some groups after consultation with regional specialists and avoided double counting, where groups were present across borders. We recognize the limitations of classifying sub-state nations, according to our definition. We treat this data as rough estimates for broad illustrative purposes.

concentrated, these groups have often been able to organize strong resistance to the central state. Many groups have been particularly threatening, demanding secession or some form of self-determination within the existing state boundaries. For the most part, such groups have been perceived as threatening the integrity of the state, challenging its legitimacy, and rejecting its attempts to forge a single nation. In many instances, these groups have sought secession, but, in several other cases, they have accepted autonomy or federalism.

In Asia, we see a particularly high number of countries with sub-state national groups relative to other regions of the developing world, as can be seen in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 and Figure 1.1. By our definition, out of thirty-four such groups, almost half are in Asia. Thirty-nine percent of Asian countries contain sub-state national groups, relative to 21, 19, and 12 percent, respectively, for North Africa and the Middle East; Western Europe, North America, and Japan; and Eastern Europe. Latin America and the Caribbean have no such groups at all.

This particularly high concentration of sub-state nationalist groups can be explained, in part, by different historical experiences of nationalism.