

Self-determination: new complexity or old?

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Unübersichtlichkeit—a lot going on: actors, agendas, and alliances on the ground and beyond in constant flux and contextually variable.

1. More actors with more agendas:

- a. Libya, Syria, Ukraine, as most obvious examples, but also conflicts like Yemen, Sudan/South Sudan, CAR, and Iraq, where there is less proliferation of actors and agendas, but formerly weak/secondary actors gain more capabilities and hence prominence (resurgent Houthis in Yemen, resurgent al-Qaeda/IS in Iraq) → **does this reflect a new quality of actor proliferation?**
- b. Agendas differ from local to global aspirations with punctual but no sustainable overlap: transnational organised crime, religiously motivated terrorism and its different manifestations, legitimate local grievances couched in the language of human rights and self-determination → **a toxic and contagious brew of challenges that are difficult to manage domestically and globally but do they represent a new quality of complexity or rather a larger scale of developments apparent at least since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?**
- c. Underlying “rationalities” of these various actors differ in terms of how far leaders are prepared to go and followers to follow: Gaddafi’s tent—Putin’s Kremlin—Bush’s and Obama’s White House—Merkel’s *Kanzleramt*
- d. All of this plays out predominantly in the context of fragile states and weak institutions that are unable to provide security and other basic public goods, thus enabling insurgents and their external backers to gain, at least temporarily, a measure of local legitimacy: Crimea and eastern Ukraine, southern/northern Yemen, parts of central and western Iraq, northern Mali → **are there any good guys left to support (or just civilians to protect from suffering), i.e., does the Cold War metaphor of “our bastards” still apply (if it ever did) despite all the unwanted and unintended consequences it implies**

2. More intense internationalisation of local conflicts:
 - a. External actors with opportunistic and strategic motivations are more easily drawn into conflicts, more willing to exploit and stoke local tensions, and more adept at bargaining locally, regionally and globally over their involvement in conflicts
 - b. External actors have different relationships with each other (over different issues): West (EU/US), Russia, China vis-à-vis Kosovo, Libya, Syria, Middle East, Iran, North Korea → **does this give a new meaning to multi-polarity, in the sense of not only multiple centres of power, but also multiple arenas in which these centres of power pursue different interests in different alliance configurations?**
 - c. External actors have different relationships with the local actors they support or constrain: variation in level of control, “due diligence”, proliferation of more local actors soliciting support (Ukraine: Slovyansk vs. Donetsk vs. Odessa; Libya: government-affiliated vs. regional vs. local security and militia forces) → **is this different from the Cold War proxy conflicts?**
 - d. States are no longer the only external actors: al-Qaeda and increasingly IS networks across MENA, “foreign fighters” in Syria, diaspora in Somalia, returning Tuareg fighters from Libya → **how new a set of phenomena is this?**
 - e. Forms and means of external support vary: direct military, material, technical, financial, political, diplomatic, etc. support of presumptive allies (support for opposition/government in Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, Iraq); indirect support by attempts to weaken presumptive allies’ opponents and influence their external backers (AQAP/Houthis/Iran; Russia/Ukraine; Russia/Iran/Syria); forms and means of external support interact in a more complex way (drones in Yemen and Pakistan—government/insurgent/population response—US/Pakistan/Yemen relations) → **new quality or merely new instruments?**

3. More domestic debate on operations
 - a. R2P, self-determination, sovereignty, territorial integrity are central to debates with shifting goalposts: Kosovo—South Ossetia/Abkhazia—Crimea
 - b. Similarly: international terrorism is a dominant and convenient leitmotif as a threat (and the need to fight against it) as a supposedly unifying goal among domestic and external actors to which all else becomes subordinate: Afghanistan/Pakistan post-2001 and again post-2008; Chechnya in the 2000s; Iraq post-2005; Arab Spring countries; Nigeria across the Maghreb and Sahel to Somalia and Yemen; Syria
 - c. All sides employ similar rhetorical mix invoking national interest and appealing to humanitarian impulse → intensified propaganda efforts → **different from traditional PsyOps?**
 - d. Opaque/deniable forms of support as a consequence of the need to claim the moral high ground: Ukraine, Libya, Syria, Yemen → **is this very different from the ideological battles of the Cold War?**

In conclusion—there is, in my view, a new quality of complexity (*neue Unübersichtlichkeit*) that shapes the environment today in which self-determination claims are negotiated, and this is likely to increase further in the future.

What is novel about this, however, is less that we are confronted with entirely new phenomena, but rather that

- there are many more facets to this complexity that occur simultaneously
- these facets are linked in different ways, creating a greater, but contextually variable level of interdependence between different actors and their agendas
- we should refrain from generalising about trends and patterns of how this new complexity plays out in different self-determination conflicts, but rather rely on case-by-case analysis in order to draw conclusions about how to manage and settle different claims: prioritise attainable goals and mobilise the necessary resources to do so
- if there is a new complexity, we should not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by it or take short cuts to understanding it but rather think about how it can be factored into our (grand) strategic thinking