Determining one’s own destiny, also known as “self-determination,” has been one of the most complex, intricate, emotion-mobilizing, aspiration-creating concept in our world. It can be “an instrument or a tool, reflecting the interests of communities, nations, great powers” or even non-state actors. For some, self-determination represents a dream, the ultimate objective representing freedom; for others, a menace implying opposition, loss, the potential to “shatter” the state.

Self-determination claims affect rarely only the relationship between a certain community at stake and the central administrative force in a sovereign state, but also influence other communities in that very country and elsewhere. The longing for greater self-determination evolves from experiences, politics, identity, history, geographical location, and the effects of various developments from peace, to crisis, to war over generations. These perceptions are shaped by real experiences but also oral history. Self-determination claims can range from limited autonomy to wide competences in all critical elements of governance—from politics to security, economics, and finance, to law, culture, education, and religion (see the competences of the federal states in Germany, and the cantons in Switzerland)—and more intense to create complete independence and establishing a new sovereign entity by shattering an existing sovereign state and transforming sovereign boundaries.

For such a new entity to be recognized as a sovereign member of the international community, though, it requires the acceptance by the General Assembly of the United Nations—and hence having the agreement by the UN Security Council, with its five permanent members of China, England, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States. Without overall international recognition the new entity will fail to be able to enjoy full equal participation and all benefits of the current international community (see the problematic situation of Kosovo and East Timor).

Self-determination, the intent for greater autonomy or independence by a certain community can however also be instrumentalized for outside interests and strategies. Third parties—state and non-state actors, also the diaspora—may have an interest to stimulate self-determination fervor in a given community in order to enhance its for various objectives, affecting the stability of the sovereign entity and state, and possibly the region, and thus to advance their own strategic interests and objectives. Much of the outcome depends on the leadership in the community, the state, and the role of information and media, as well as the overall strategic situation in the region.

As today’s international system is still based upon the sovereign power of its members, there exists however no enforceable right for state shattering self-determination, rather, at the end, its effective and complete implementation will depend on the will of the Great Powers and the lead-

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ership, as well as the regional, and international framework situation. In today’s real-time interactive interconnected national and global politics, local issues can become national and international very fast, while critical developments elsewhere can affect local politics instantaneously.

Perception does form reality, certainly in political life and very much so in the situation of one’s community and the push for maximization of one’s own governance, but for its success the situation in the international and regional framework is decisive.

Self-determination has an internal and external dimension: the internal aspect suggests the capability of the community/group/nation to peacefully determine the way it is governed from politics and security, to language, culture, religion, economics and how to set ones’ rights and rules, and to do so by democratic vote. The external dimension addresses the relationship between that community and its outside world, or, typically with a central authority of the sovereign entity within which the community finds itself. Self-determination interests of one community have always also to be seen of comparable interests of other communities within the given state. Hence it rarely is a zero-sum game between the one community and the central authority. Many times, in addition, communities are separated/divided by hard external sovereign boundaries—one part lives within one sovereign entity/state, the other in another neighboring country. In addition, economics does matter. The more a community has important economic and fiscal capabilities or natural resources, or research and industrial facilities, the more enticing it will be to develop feelings for greater autonomy. Particularly if the community sees itself as the key economic power in its state system, it will look for appropriate rights, also in comparison to other communities within that state. In case these expectations and aspirations do remain unfulfilled, there is a danger of increasing tensions between that community and the state power center, but also between that community and other equal communities in the same state.

For sovereign states who are members of the European Union—currently the only supranational organization in our world whose members have voluntarily relinquished some of their rights and
privileges, from finance to standards, to trade, and foreign relations—there exists hence an additional layer of sovereign authority (see the graph.ii)

While the European Commission has the right to execute, it is at the end the European Council, representing the member states, which does make the final decisions. There again it is the member states that carry the day. So it would be unwise for a community within a member state of the European Union to try to execute state shattering self-determination with the intent and expectation to be immediately accepted as a new individual member of the European Union.

There are in this context “The Critical 7+ S-Terms” relating to self-determination to keep in mind:

- State
- Sovereignty
- Self-Determination, Self-Governance
- Security
- Strategy
- Subsidiarity
- Symbolism vs. Substance
- Supranational Authority
- Social Media

**How to Effectively Address a Self-Determination Crisis**

To effectively address a self-determination crisis, it is imperative to:

- Maintain communications between all key actors, at least on some essentials;
- De-escalate on all fronts and for all actors;
- Reduce outside influence;
- Allow face saving moves for all involved—the less the emotional porcelain is further destroyed, the easier it will be to move positively onward and forward;
- Address the cost-benefit calculation of any actor, sensitively—compromise will be required, but with the necessary amount of political will, anything is achievable;
- Develop a novel idea in an otherwise deadlocked relationship adapted to the framework situation in the state, the region, and the larger geopolitical context at the point in time;
- Be ready to accept multiple identities.

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Do not:

- Stop communication between the parties;
- Suppress self-determination, crush, or squash it by force (nor completely ignore it)—the more one does that, the more intense and potentially explosive the movement will become, the more it will continue to fester, the deeper the crisis goes, and the higher the chance that outside powers and interests interfere as well;
- Let the “genie of self-determination spirits come out of its bottle”—once it is out and entices the communal leaders, here and there, it can do so anywhere, in the country itself and far beyond; social media enable this further;
- Ignore generational involvement and the power and influence of women;
- Ignore the role of religion;
- Underestimate the power of global social media and the diaspora;
- Be blinded by pride and veining in justice in order to force an ultimatum on the other side, and beware of unintended consequences and reactions;
- Underestimate the negative effects on the next generation—in Europe the ERASMUS generation, men and women, who personally experience political crisis today for the first time and possibly political violence;
- Drag a self-determination crisis out for too long—the longer it festers, the more it will become difficult to resolve, the more tertiary interests could come in, and the more violent it can become;
- Overlook the impact on other situations, in Europe, and other continents elsewhere which might very much boomerang back.

For Further Reading:


