

Facilitating Secession? The Role of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Self-Determination Conflicts

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Abstract

The impact of external interventions on the outcome of violent self-determination conflicts represents a relatively under-explored field within the scholarship on secessionism. This thesis seeks to conceptualise and explore the ways in which peacekeeping operations (PKOs) alter the secessionists' threat environment and, consequently, their chances of success. In doing so, it will investigate the claim that the deployment of UN PKOs inadvertently facilitates secession by isolating the rebels and preventing their reintegration. A statistical test is run to corroborate this hypothesis. The findings of this thesis indicate that a significant, positive correlation exists between the presence of UN PKOs and the secessionist movements' expectations of survival. Consequently, the study points to the necessity of distinguishing between and disaggregating different kinds of external interventions in secessionist conflicts.

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1. Introduction

Since the end of World War II, a plethora of new states and state-like entities has emerged as a result of secessionist or self-determination (SD) struggles. According to Griffiths (2016), we live in the age of secession: were the current trend of state birth to persist over time, one could expect to observe some 350 sovereign countries by 2100. Secessionist struggles pose important dilemmas to policymakers and scholars alike. On one hand, the phenomenon raises the fundamental question of which polities ought to be considered sovereign and of how the international community bestows or impedes recognition (e.g. Anderson, 2012; Griffiths, 2017; Ker-Lindsay, 2014; 2017; 2018; Österud, 1997; Ratner, 1996). Another strand of the literature focuses instead on secessionist violence. Fearon and Laitin (2003) and Sorens (2012) estimated that more than half of the civil wars since the end of WWII have somehow involved separatist claims, with Walter going so far as suggesting that SD disputes constitute “the chief source of violence in the world today” (Walter, 2009, p. 3).

There are several theoretical and empirical reasons why secessionist conflicts ought to be treated as a separate analytical category and not as a mere subset of civil wars in general (Heraclides, 1990). According to Florea (2017, 2020) and Ahram (2019), the core difference between secessionist wars and ethnic wars is the rebels’ goal, namely, achieving self-determination and independence from an incumbent state, as opposed to regime change. Secessionist conflicts are not necessarily ethnic in nature (Toft, 2012). For instance, Fortna (2008) cites the Rwandan civil war as an ethnically-based yet non-secessionist conflict and the 1994 Yemen war as secessionist but not ethnically-based conflict. Overall, what appears to be unique to SD conflicts is the set of incentives and strategies secessionists manipulate to alter the *threat environment* or *strategic field* in their favour (Florea, 2020; Griffiths and Wasser, 2019; Jackson, 1990).

Attempting to attract international support arguably constitutes the most common strategy (Coggins, 2011). Examples of external involvement in secessionist conflicts include the Russian interventions in Transnistria (Blakkisrud and Kølsto, 2011), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Beacháin, 2019; Caspersen, 2013; Peña-Ramos, 2017), and the Turkish intervention in Northern Cyprus (Ker-Lindsay, 2017, 2018).

On the other hand, the role of international organisations (IOs) in secessionist conflicts is less well understood (cf. Axyonova & Gawrich, 2018). From a normative perspective, IOs such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union generally oppose non-colonial unilateral secessions, mainly due to the primacy of the *uti possidetis* principle (e.g. Ker-Lindsay, 2017; Relitz, 2019; Ratner, 1996; Rudinková, 2017). The influence of IOs in secessionist conflicts is not limited to the normative sphere, however. In some instances, IOs may actively engage in military activities in order to contain conflict and preserve peace.

Indeed, a number of scholars has argued that the deployment of peacekeeping operations (PKOs) in secessionist conflicts might substantially alter their outcome. Florea's (2020) recent contribution opened a new line inquiry positing that the survival of secessionist de-facto states depends on two crucial factors: first, on the extent of external military support they receive; second, on the presence of PKOs. Their core argument is that by preventing the re-escalation of violence PKOs effectively freeze the conflict and help maintain the status-quo. This in turn accelerates secessionist state building and long-term survival. As a relevant example, the author mentions the 2005-2011 UNMIS PKO as a facilitator of the South Sudan independence campaign (cf. Hansen; 2014; Podder, 2014). Florea derives their argument from Fortna's (2008) seminal intuition that the presence of PKOs might inadvertently legitimise the secessionists by preventing their military defeat, thus increasing their chances of success. This intuition is related to Regan's (2002) counter-

intuitive finding that neutral PKO interventions might accidentally *lengthen* conflict instead of promoting permanent settlement.

Overall, Florea's (2020) line of enquiry, albeit compelling, remains puzzling. While the above-mentioned findings point towards a novel way of conceptualising external interventions, they also highlight an important theoretical and empirical gap. This should be filled in order to improve our knowledge on the determinants of secessionist success. To be more specific, Florea's (2020) work that does not distinguish between different types of PKOs. This is problematic since, depending on their material and normative capabilities, their effectiveness can dramatically change (e.g. Bellamy & Williams, 2015; Bove & Ruggeri, 2019; Diehl & Druckman, 2010; Di Salvatore & Ruggeri, 2017). Second, Florea does not differentiate between *impartial* and *unilateral* PKOs. This distinction, however, constitutes one of the core tenets upon which Regan's (2002) and Fortna's (2008) intuitions are based on. Crucially, impartiality represents one of the key features of UN PKOs (Hultman, Kathman, & Shannon, 2014; Rhoads, 2016). Impartiality, the argument goes, can unintentionally undermine conflict settlement (cf. Cunningham, 2010; Regan & Aydin, 2006). This, in turn, may lead to higher chances of secessionist survival. Since Florea's (2020) study conflates different types of PKOs, it does not fully capture the strategic and tactical uniqueness embodied by UN missions; nor does it cover the theoretical mechanisms whereby impartiality might alter the combatants' strategic calculations. As far as the author knows, no study systematically addresses these insights in the context of SD conflicts. Arguably, the above-mentioned intuition that impartial PKO interventions might facilitate secession remains ultimately untested.

Consequently, the goal of this thesis is to test whether the presence of PKOs increases the secessionists' chances of success. The underlying research question is the following:

RQ: To what extent do UN PKOs facilitate the achievement of secessionists' goals?

This thesis will contribute to the literature on secessionism in several ways. First, it will re-evaluate the role of external actors and, more specifically, of PKOs. In doing so, it will advance a novel theoretical framework on the impact of UN PKOs on the outcome of secessionist conflicts. Second, this study will provide empirical evidence to the previously untested intuition that UN PKOs might increase the secessionists' chances of success (Fortna, 2008). Thirdly, this thesis will argue that it is necessary to disentangle different types of external interventions in order to fully understand their impact on the secessionists' strategic environment.

The study is structured as follows. The second section briefly surveys the literature on violent secessionism, focusing on external interventions and the knowns and unknowns of peacekeeping in SD conflicts. The third section introduces the theoretical framework and main expectations of the study. The fourth section explains the research design and describes the main variables. The fifth section presents and interprets the study's findings in light of the already-existing scholarship. Finally, the sixth section summarises the findings, discusses their implications, and concludes.

2. Literature Review

This section is divided into three subsections. The first subsection provides a general overview on the literature on secessionist movements. The second subsection focuses on the role of external actors in secessionist conflicts and how their interventions might alter their outcome. The section concludes by revisiting the study's puzzle in the light of the literature on UN peacekeeping and its potential effects on conflict outcomes.

2.1 Secessionist Typologies

Before focusing on the anomaly at the core of this study, it is worth providing a brief summary of the literature on secessionist typologies. This will help contextualise the role of external actors in secessionist conflicts.

Scholars tend to categorise secessionist movements on the basis of the strategies and tactics they employ in order to achieve their goals. Usually, said goal is full self-determination (but see Hirsch, 2015; Mehler, 2014). In the context of this thesis, it is assumed that the secessionist's ultimate goal is to establish an independent state and, consequently, avoid reintegration (Ahram, 2019). A key macro-distinction scholars tend to make is between secessionist movements that make use of conventional or regular tactics and those which instead resort to unconventional or irregular means. These are not mutually exclusive categories but they do engender different strategic and tactical choices. Following Cunningham's (2013) framework, conventional tactics entail participating in electoral competitions and exploiting the existing institutional channels to obtain more legitimacy.

Table 1. Varieties of Secessionist Movements

Typology	Means	Strategies	Examples
Democratic Movements	Conventional	Electoral Competition	Catalonia, Scotland, Quebec, Flanders, Corsica, Sardinia
Indigenous Legal Movements	Tendentiously Conventional	Electoral Competition, Appeal to Inherent Sovereignty Rights	Hawaii, Lakotah, Maori, Murrawarri Republic
Combative Movements (Strong Incumbent State)	Unconventional	Civil Resistance, Appeals to Human Rights, Violent Compellence	Uyghurs, West Papua, Corsica
Combative Movements (Weak Incumbent State)	Unconventional	Violent Compellence, Civil War	Moro, Karens, Bougainville
Decolonial Movement	Context-dependent	Context-dependent, mainly	Angola, East Timor, Western Sahara, West Papua
De-Facto State Movement	Context-dependent	Context-dependent	Abkhazia, Transnistria, Somaliland

Source: adapted from Griffiths (2021)

Conversely, the core goal of irregular tactics is to impose onerous costs on the incumbents via unconventional means such as strikes, sit-ins, and mass campaigns. Additionally, some SD movements might resort to violence and engage in terrorism or, on a larger scale, in civil war. **Table 1** includes a list of SD movements divided by typology and tactics. This study will focus on violent secessionist movements (for a comprehensive summary, see Griffiths & Wasser, 2020).

Whether violence constitutes an effective strategy to achieve independence remains debated (see Chenoweth & Stephan, 2008, 2011; Chenoweth & Ulfelder, 2017; Griffiths & Wasser, 2019). What most scholars agree on, however, is that secessionist success is unlikely to derive from a direct military victory: “[no SD movement] achieved independence by marching to the stronghold of the common-state government and imposing victory [...] over half of the secessionist states achieved independence by simply walking away from a collapsing central government”

(Roeder, 2018, p. 6). External interventions constitute an important factor in facilitating this process. The next subsection explores this insight.

2.2. External Actors in Secessionist Conflicts: Hope and Compellence

The impact of external actors on secession is well-captured by Horowitz's claim that the outcomes of SD struggles are "determined largely by international politics, by the balance of interests and forces that extend beyond the state - factors largely out of the campaigns' control" (Horowitz, 2000, p. 320). Third-party interventions are not unique to secessionist conflicts (Cunningham, 2010; Howard & Stark, 2017; Kathman, 2010; Regan, 1996, 2002). What is particularly relevant in the context of this study are the specific ways in which external interventions alter the combatants' strategies and incentives.

Overall, San-Akca's (2016) seminal work suggests that it is not possible to treat SD movements (or other conflictual actors) as mere puppets of the great powers. This is notwithstanding that fact that interstate rivalries play an important role in shaping states' propensity to support rebel groups (e.g. Caspersen, 2013; Mulaj, 2011; Peña-Ramos, 2017; Souleimanov, Abrahamyan, & Aliyev, 2018). This observation is crucial because it cautions against overemphasising international recognition as a determinant of secessionist success.

According to several scholars, "external legitimacy is the fundamental distinguishing feature between states and nonstates" (Coggins, 2011, p. 461). As Österud (1997) concluded, however, the international legal framework on recognition is erratic and inconsistent, as the recent examples of Kosovo and South Sudan indicate (e.g. Ekeke & Lubisi, 2019; Rudincová, 2017; Ryngaert & Sobrie, 2011; Vrbetic, 2013). Counter-intuitively, certain secessionist actors might go as far as avoiding recognition due to its tendency to increase strategic value and thus limit agency (Caspersen, 2015). A common Abkhazian aphorism after the 2008 Russian intervention was "we

used to be independent but now we have recognition” (quoted in Ó Beacháin, 2019, p. 59). In sum, the secessionists’ reliance on external actors to achieve recognition is largely based on hopes and promises, rather than certainties: diplomatic aid does not presuppose *juridical* aid (Ahram, 2019).

Given the problematic nature of international recognition, some scholars focus instead on military and economic external aid. For one, efficient resource mobilisation is essential since secessionists are almost always at a comparative disadvantage vis-à-vis the incumbents (Roeder, 2018). Conversely, state sponsors can “provide funding, weapons, logistics, training, and bases to groups that often have little organizational experience, no consistent revenue flow, and no territorial base” (Carter, 2012, p. 129). Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) showed how external state interventions can ensure the secessionists’ survival during the initial stages of the conflict, when capabilities are scarcer.

Secondly, external interventions tend to significantly alter both conflict duration and settlement likelihood. Cunningham (2010) argues that external states’ agendas rarely match those of other parties. Adding new issues to the negotiation table ultimately shrinks the chances of finding an acceptable bargain, thus lowering the likelihood of reaching a definitive settlement. According to Sawyer and Cunningham (2017), external interventions significantly alter the combatants’ rational calculus by increasing uncertainty and misrepresenting the rebels’ capabilities. Uncertainty, combined with the rebels’ commitment inability while still being supported by external patrons, may hinder settlement.

These mechanisms may not apply to the actual, *violent* aspects of the conflict. Indeed, several authors suggested that biased or unilateral interventions (i.e., interventions where the involved actors show a clear preference vis-à-vis one side of the struggle) are *more* likely to abate and subsequently prevent the re-escalation of violence (e.g. Cunningham, 2010; Regan, 2002;

Regan and Aydin 2006). This last observation constitutes a key component of this study's puzzle: to be more precise, while scholars have already explored the role of *unilateral* interventions in secessionist conflicts, the same cannot be said in regard to *non-unilateral* interventions.

The anomaly is that some forms of non-unilateral interventions such as peacekeeping might not conform to the above mentioned mechanisms. Indeed, the impact of non-unilateral interventions on the outcome of SD conflicts remains ultimately unclear. Going back to the nature of the anomaly, external interventions are known to introduce *informational asymmetries* that complicate commitment (Cunningham, 2010; Sawyer and Cunningham, 2017). Impartial PKOs, however, are known to *reduce* informational asymmetries (e.g. Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon, 2014). The paradox becomes evident when both Fortna (2008) and Florea (2020) counter-intuitively argue that the presence of PKOs in secessionist conflicts might prolong their duration, rather than shortening it. Neither study, however, systematically tests these intuitions. In fact, the role of UN PKOs, albeit central in their line of inquiry, remains neglected. Again, this hinders our knowledge of the determinants of SD success.

2.3. Secessionism and Peacekeeping

To further elaborate on this puzzle, consider Florea's recent claim that "Peacekeepers present on the territory of de facto states can also critically alter the threat environment in which separatists operate" (Florea, 2020, p. 1010). In an earlier contribution, they argued that PKOs do not only prevent conflict recurrence but "can also reinforce the status quo" (Florea, 2017, p. 345). They also found that the presence of PKOs is positively correlated with both a higher chance of secessionist survival and increased rebel state building. Florea's work is in turn based on Fortna's (2008) influential study on the effectiveness of peacekeeping as a conflict reducing tool. Among

other findings, they noted that “peacekeepers can confer legitimacy on rebels as recognized political actors” (Fortna, 2008, p. 40).

These studies, however, do not rigorously discuss the theoretical mechanisms behind these phenomena. Problematically, Florea does not conceptualise what peacekeeping entails, but instead conflates different types of PKOs together. Treating different kinds of external interventions separately, however, might disentangle significantly different effects on conflict outcome (Regan, 2002). In fact, Florea does not specify the ways in which PKOs are different from other kinds of external interventions. Their claim that PKOs act as “military and political buffers” (Florea, 2020, p. 1010) may as well apply to the above-mentioned *unilateral* interventions. Thus, Florea does not distinguish between biased or impartial interventions, or in other terms, between UN PKOs and non-UN PKOs. This once again matters because impartial interventions are known to be connected to specific sets of incentives and strategies. This is not to argue that UN PKOs are always neutral (cf. Rhoads, 2016; Hunt, 2017; Karlsrud, 2015; Kenkel & Foley, 2021; Laurence, 2019). Insofar as impartiality is the core tenet of UN peacekeeping, however, one can argue that the UN is both theoretically and empirically distinct from other external and peacekeeping actors.

As mentioned in the previous subsection, impartiality is known to prolong conflict (Cunningham, 2010; Regan, 2002). At the same time, UN PKOs are generally associated with substantial conflict-reducing effects (e.g. Bellamy, 2015; Diehl & Druckman, 2010; Di Salvatore & Ruggeri 2017; Fjelde, Hultman, & Nilsson, 2019; Fortna, 2008; Hegre, Hultman, & Nygård; 2019; Hultman, Kathman, & Shannon, 2014; Koops et al., 2015). This contrast is sometimes conceptualised as the difference between *conflict-containment* and *conflict-mediation* (cf. Beardsley, Cunningham, & White, 2019; Regan, 2002; Regan & Aydin, 2006). The literature on violent secessionism is currently unable to explain how these two seemingly contradictory features

of UN PKOs might affect conflict outcomes. Stated in other terms, it is not clear how the presence of PKOs might affect commitment problems among the combatants. Consequently, the following section advances a novel theoretical framework on the role of impartial UN PKOs in SD conflicts.

3. Theoretical Framework

The main goal of this section is to conceptualise the role of impartial PKOs in SD conflicts and provide a theoretical rationale to the claim that their presence might facilitate secessionist success. The core argument is that PKOs are expected to significantly alter the secessionists' threat environment by freezing the conflict and unintentionally making reintegration more complicated.

The framework's starting point is Olson's (1993, 2000) conceptual distinction between *roving* and *stationary* bandits. While the former are interested in extracting resources from different areas, the latter monopolise theft over a fixed territory and protect their subjects from anarchy. Olson suggests that settling and providing public goods to the local population represents the bandit's rational choice since tax revenues are more reliable than migratory plundering. Blakkisrud and Kolstø (2011) argues that secessionist conflicts such as the Moldovan-Transnistrian war mirror this mechanism: once the secessionists managed to avoid military defeat, they opted to entrench the status quo and consolidate their position instead of renouncing to their gains and being reintegrated.

Secessionist will tendentiously refuse any settlement that does not improve the status-quo (Florea, 2017). For example, the frozen conflict in Northern-Cyprus represents a "diplomats' graveyard" (Asmussen, 2015, p. 2) where neither side is willing to abandon their positions and agree on a permanent solution. Hence, if one is to find the determinants of secessionist success, it is first necessary to explore the factors allowing SD actors to establish and consolidate a monopoly of violence over a certain territory. As previously argued, international recognition is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for secessionist survival. Arguably, the failure of reaching a negotiated settlement could be also interpreted as a strategy to further prolong state building and avoid diplomatic reintegration (cf. Relitz, 2019).

3.1. Secessionist Strategies

Numerous factors may alter the secessionists' threat environment. Several scholars suggest that secessionist movements operating within the boundaries of pre-established administrative units or *proto-states* (e.g., Bougainville) are more likely to be recognised as legitimate actors compared to groups lacking any territorial attachment (Griffiths, 2015). For one, proto-states might help the secessionists consolidate their political-identitarian hegemony through self-government (either via formal or informal institutional arrangements) (Roeder, 2012). When the conflict escalates, secessionists might consider protracted violence strategically profitable in that intense struggles can raise enthusiasm for their cause, raise the expectations of the local population, and progressively dispel the idea that the incumbent state can be kept intact (Roeder, 2018).

Relatedly, Toft (2012) argues that larger, concentrated groups are more likely to see violence as strategically advantageous in that geographically-compacted regions facilitate political mobilisation and military operations. Similarly, another factor that critically alters the secessionists' threat environment is the degree to which their movement is fragmented into competing factions (Bakke, Cunningham, & Seymour, 2012; Cunningham, Bakke, & Seymour, 2012; Seymour, Bakke, & Cunningham, 2016). Krause's (2017) framework posits that SD movements encompassing one clearly hegemonic actor are more likely to be successful than fragmented movements. The reason is that the former are generally more risk-averse than the latter. Therefore, hegemonic SD movements are more likely to gather and mobilise the resources necessary to sustain a prolonged struggle.

Finally, the literature on de-facto states (also known as unrecognised, pseudo-, quasi-states and so on) (e.g. Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011; Caspersen, 2013; Florea, 2014, 2017; Jackson, 1990; Kursani, 2020) tends to emphasise *state building* as a legitimising and conflict-stabilising strategy.

State building helps the secessionist reinforce their monopoly of violence and mobilise new resources in case of protracted conflict. As previously mentioned, external state support might significantly facilitate this process. This partially explains why secessionist actors might be interested in attracting external patrons (cf. Florea, 2020).

3.2. Incumbent Strategies

From a tactical perspective, incumbent states are confronted with two choices when engaging secessionists (Beardsley, Gleditsch, & Lo, 2015). On the short run, containment represents the less costly approach. Avoiding direct confrontation, however, might inadvertently empower the rebels by letting them entrench and progressively gain more legitimacy. Alternatively, incumbent states might decide to quickly attack the rebels' strongholds in order to decapitate their movement (cf. Paul et al., 2013). This is, for instance, the solution the Indonesian government adopted vis-à-vis the West Papuan and East Timorese SD movements (Macleod, 2015; Webster, 2007). Another example is the 2009 violent reintegration of Tamil Elam into Sri Lanka (Mushtaq, 2012).

This strategy can be equally problematic, however. Kalyvas's (2006) seminal work on the logic of violence in civil wars is especially instructive. The author argues that in attacking rebel strongholds, counter-insurgents might face severe informational and tactical disadvantages. Crucially, when rebels share an ethnic base with the local populations (as in the vast majority of secessionist conflicts) it becomes more difficult for the incumbents to distinguish between the civilian population and the actual combatants. Indiscriminate violence against rebel strongholds might not only result in hefty reputational costs but it can also further alienate the local population and reinforce the secessionists' cause (cf. Kalyvas & Kocher, 2009; Kocher, Pepinsky, & Kalyvas, 2011).

3.3. UN PKOs as Conflict-Reducing Actors

When a PKO is deployed, the combatants' incentives and strategies change accordingly. Beardsley and Gleditsch's (2015) framework posit that UN PKOs exert a conflict containment effect, that is, they tend to abate violence by spatially containing and confining the rebels. In other words, PKOs alleviate commitment problems (cf. Florea, 2017). In doing so, however, they might end up legitimising the rebels and strengthening their position vis-à-vis the incumbents. Several mechanisms contribute to this process. In essence, the presence of PKOs disincentives violence and significantly increases its cost (cf. Fjelde, Hultman, & Nilsson, 2019; Hultman, Kathman, & Shannon, 2014). PKOs effectiveness is also dependent on the specific area they are deployed in and on the material resources at their disposal: a larger number of better trained troops leads to stronger conflict-reducing effects (Peitz & Reisch, 2019).

From a more tactical perspective, conflict containment can be achieved in different ways. Firstly, by adopting defensive and observational positions the peacekeepers can limit the rebels' movements and decrease their ability of moving undetected. Reducing information costs is associated with a lower likelihood of ambushes and unaccounted abuses (Hultman, Kathman, & Shannon, 2014). This is especially important in secessionist conflicts because, as mentioned above, indiscriminate violence is more likely when the rebels share an ethnic link with the local population (Kalyvas, 2006).

Secondly, by occupying the most important strategic arteries PKOs constitute a major obstacle for all sides since confronting them may result in severe military and reputational costs. Notwithstanding their impartiality, UN peacekeepers can act defensively and, in extreme cases, displace the rebels from the territory they control. The 1960-1964 PKO in Congo (ONUC) is a striking example of how costly transgressions can be (Boulden, 2015; Ekeke & Lubisi, 2019; Fabry,

2011; Kent, 2017; Larmer & Kennes, 2014). Initially, peacekeepers refrained from directly engaging the Katangese, despite their mandate to contain the rebellion. The secessionists' decision to attack UN troops, however, provoked a strong reaction that ultimately led to the movement's defeat. The ONUC case, however, is exceptional: normally, UN PKOs create neutral, buffer zones which neither side can exploit (Florea, 2020). Thirdly, monitoring and patrolling activities can effectively cut the combatants' supplies of resources and promote their disarmament (Hulthman, Kathman, & Shannon, 2014). As Beardsley, Cunningham, & White (2019) showed, peacekeeping can also promote in-conflict mediation, which in turn encourages conflict-containment.

Containment, however, does not presuppose *permanent* conflict resolution. To further elaborate on why *impartial* PKOs might inadvertently facilitate secession, let us reconsider the idea that ethnic and secessionist rebels have the incentive not to move and promote local level governance (Mampilly, 2012). Indeed, once the immediate threat of military reintegration has waned, secessionists may want to consolidate their positions via state building (Beardsley, Gleditsch, & Lo, 2015; Florea, 2020). This does not only increase the secessionists' legitimacy, but it also helps them mobilise more resources should the conflict re-escalate. As previously mentioned, state building helps prevent reintegration: once a de-facto state is established, it becomes increasingly difficult for the incumbents to displace the rebels (Florea, 2017).

PKOs might inadvertently facilitate this process by insulating the rebels from the incumbents. This minimises the chances of them being violently reintegrated. Once a formal or de-facto truce is established, diplomatic reintegration becomes likewise difficult due to the inherent nature of the struggle: "Because the clashing interests of the metropolitan and de facto states are diametrically opposed (a zero-sum conflict), the chances for peaceful conflict resolution are low, especially if the unilateral secession was associated with military conflict" (Relitz, 2019,

p. 6). *Contra Florea* (2017), one could argue that *issue indivisibility* (Fearon, 1995) does also undermine the chance of reaching permanent settlement. This is once again linked to the inherent nature of the struggle: “Secessionist conflicts often progress into a zero-sum game, in which the underlying positions of both sides are incompatible: they perceive the object of the conflict, the affiliation of a territory, as indivisible” (Relitz, 2019, p. 6).

To summarise, it is expected that the presence of impartial PKOs in SD conflicts inadvertently facilitates secession by significantly altering the threat environment. By containing and abating violence, PKOs insulate the rebels from the incumbents, thus enabling their survival. This is also expected to indirectly legitimise the secessionists and lower the chances of peaceful integration. As mentioned above, these intuitions are yet to be systematically analysed. The following hypothesis was thus formulated in order to empirically test them:

H1: The deployment of a UN PKO in a secessionist conflict increases the secessionists' chance of survival.

4. Research Design

In order to test the main hypothesis, several data sets were combined to obtain a representative sample of all violent secessionist movements from 1945 to 2020. The baseline is Sambanis, Germann, and Schädel's (2018) study and their related dataset on secessionist movements. Their dataset was subsequently integrated with Griffiths's (2019) typology of SD movements, Florea's (2014) dataset on de-facto states, and original coding for post-2012 conflicts. The goal was to include all secessionist movements that have made use of violent tactics at least once since the beginning of their activity period.

Merging different sources was made necessary by the absence of a single dataset that would cover the totality of relevant cases. Commonly used datasets on military conflicts were likewise impractical mainly due to arbitrary limitations on what constitutes violence. The definition used in this study entails at least one death caused by secessionist violence. This is less strict than, for instance, the cut-off point of 25 battle-related deaths adopted by the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Pettersson & Öberg, 2020). Following Sambanis, Germann, and Schädel (2018) (and unlike Griffiths, 2015), decolonisation movements were excluded as is customary in the secessionist literature. Similarly to Griffiths, each movement was counted only once. Therefore, each row represents a different secessionist movement. This yielded a total of 142 violent SD movements from 1945 to 2020.

An alternative approach might consist in using *conflict years* (or dyad-years) as the unit of analysis, as opposed to single iterations of the movement. This is Florea's (2020) solution. This choice, albeit theoretically richer, poses considerable practical problems. In fact, data on secessionist conflicts is generally scarce and not extensively available. Introducing an additional layer of complexity would require detailed data on each case. Unfortunately, the currently

available datasets do not provide such opportunity. How these methodological limitations might affect the findings will be further discussed in the following sections.

4.1 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable, SURVIVALYRS, measures the number of years a secessionist movement has been able to survive and not be reintegrated into the incumbent state, starting from the moment it obtained the monopoly of violence (however partial) over the territory they lay claim to. It is a continuous variable derived from Florea's (2014) dataset ($\mu = 9.77$; $\text{std} = 15.5$). Cases that were not covered by Florea were coded analogously by consulting Sambanis, Germann, and Schädel's (2018) supplementary notes.

4.2 Independent Variables

The study's main independent variable, UNPKO, measures whether a UN peacekeeping mission was present during the conflict. It is a dichotomous variable: 0 indicates that no PKO was deployed, while 1 indicates that it was. The list of relevant PKOs was obtained by consulting official UN data (United Nations, 2021). Following Kathman (2013), for each mission it was indicated the average number of personnel deployed (TOTALTROOPS). It is expected that the presence of a UN PKO is significantly and positively correlated with secessionist survival. Due to data shortage, it was not possible to account for the presence of non-UN PKOs. As a partial remedy, several proxies were used to take into account whether external actors were involved in the conflict.

Following Florea (2020), EXTERNAL, FINANCIAL, and TROOPWEAPONS indicate, respectively, whether the SD movement was supported by an external state patron, whether they received financial support from it, and whether they received military assistance (either directly or indirectly). These variables are derived from San-Akca's (2016) Non-State Armed Group Dataset

(NAG) and were supplemented with the UCDP Actor Dataset (Pettersson & Öberg, 2020). Although these indicators do not account for the *magnitude* of external support, they are still useful to determine whether and how external actors were involved. It is expected that external actor support facilitates secessionist survival.

Subsequently, a LEFT variable was added to indicate whether the secessionists follow a leftist ideology. Mampilly (2012) and Florea (2020) suggest that Marxist/communist rebellions facilitate local governance and, in turn, secessionist survival. The FRAGMENTED variable is dichotomous and indicates whether the secessionist movement is represented by more than one hegemonic actor. Data for this variable was derived, when possible, from Cunningham, Bakke, & Seymour's (2012) dataset on secessionist fragmentation. Finally, the PROTO variable is based on Griffiths's (2019) dataset and it indicates whether the secessionist movements claims a proto-state, i.e., whether the conflict takes place within the boundary of pre-established administrative lines.

4.3 Control Variables

A number of control variables were added to take into account the systematic variety of factors that might be correlated with secessionists survival. These are all based on Sambanis, Germann, and Schädel's (2018) dataset.

LANDBORDER and SEASHORE indicate, respectively, whether the secessionists lay a claim to a territory that shares a land border with a recognised country and whether said territory has a sea outlet. HYDROCARBON is a dichotomous variable that measures whether the territory claimed by the secessionists include hydrocarbon reserves (oil/gas, onshore and offshore) as these could significantly affect the rebels' resource capabilities. GROUPCON is a proxy variable that indicates whether the SD movement is geographically concentrated, that is, whether at least 50% of the group members lives in an area where they constitute at least 50% of its local population.

An alternative variable measuring secessionist group size in proportion to the incumbent state's population was available but could not be used due to the large number of missing values (a methodological limitation which also led to the exclusion of other variables).

KIN measures whether a substantially numerous ethnically kin group is geographically proximate to the secessionist group, whether in a neighbouring country or overseas. Similarly, EXCLUDED is a dichotomous variable that measures whether the SD movement is politically excluded from central state power. Finally, UCDP_CUMULATIVEINTENSITY indicates whether the conflict exceeded more than 1,000 battle related deaths and can thus be considered a war according to the UCDP standard (see Pettersson & Öberg, 2020).

5. Results and Discussion

Table 2. Linear Regression Model of Secessionist Movement Survival

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Constant)	7.74*** (1.30)	2.62 (2.30)	2.01 (2.34)
UNPKO	18.26*** (4.20)	11.18* (4.40)	9.759* (4.53)
Financial		7.47 (3.79)	5.391 (3.86)
Left		-1.12 (1.53)	-0.078 (1.54)
TroopWeapons		-5.36 (3.72)	-4.988 (3.76)
External		3.74 (2.69)	4.716 (2.74)
Fragmentation		1.33 (2.55)	0.322 (2.64)
Proto		9.70** (2.91)	8.657** (3.11)
Seashore			3.930 (3.87)
Landborder			-8.837* (4.40)
Hydrocarbon			1.038 (3.74)
Groupcon			3.829 (3.97)
Kin			0.177 (3.89)
Excluded			5.532* (2.68)
Ucdp_cumulativeintensity			3.471 (3.04)
R ²	0.124	0.241	0.301
Adj. R ²	0.117	0.199	0.220
N	136	136	136

[Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$]

Due to the continuous nature of the dependent variable (secessionist survival years), an OLS multilinear regression was conducted. **Table 2** shows the results. Before discussing them, however, it is opportune to restate Florea's (2020) caveat on validity: insofar as most variables are based on secondary sources, accuracy might be low due to the high risk of false-positives and false-negatives, i.e, the coding might not reflect the structural specificities of secessionist conflicts and produce misleading classifications. Moreover, the low number of observations in the main independent variable (UN PKO) might introduce substantial bias and skew the results (cf. Clayton et al., 2017). Therefore, particular caution is needed when interpreting the findings.

Having said that, three models were run. The first model includes the main independent variable (UNPKO) only; the second model introduces the remaining independent variables, whereas the last one tests for all the previous variables in addition to the control variables.

5.1. Model 1

Model 1 shows, as expected, a positive correlation between the presence of a UN PKO and secessionist survival. The correlation is significant at the 99.9% threshold ($p < 0.001$). Since the correlation is positive, it can be said that, *ceteris paribus*, the presence of a UN PKO in the context of a secessionist conflict is associated with a higher chance of secessionist survival. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected and the study's main hypothesis (The deployment of a PKO in a secessionist conflict increases the secessionists' chance of survival) accepted.

This finding substantiates Fortna's (2008) original intuition that PKOs might inadvertently help rebels achieve their goals. Due to the inherent limitations of the statistical method, it is not possible to directly determine which of the above mentioned causal mechanisms are responsible for this effect. In other words, it is not possible to directly establish whether the sole presence of a UN PKO is a sufficient condition for secessionist success, or whether the secessionists need to

actively exploit the peacekeepers' presence to their advantage. A simple correlation test was run to determine whether the number of PK troops (TOTALTROOPS) is associated with the dependent variable. The result was insignificant: $r(14) = -0.203$, $p = 0.506$. If this were confirmed via more robust methods, it would further confirm Fjelde, Hultman, and Nilsson's (2019) finding that PKO size is not necessarily linked to higher conflict-reducing effectiveness. Again, there is reason to be sceptical of this result since the low n of cases (14) might be distorting the calculation (cf. Di Salvatore & Ruggeri, 2017).

5.2. Model 2

Model 2 is interesting in that none of the added variables reaches significance, with the major exceptions of the main independent variable and the PROTO variable. In particular, the main independent variable (UNPKO) became significant at the 95% threshold ($p = 0.012$); FINANCIAL was barely insignificant ($p = 0.051$), while the remaining variables were all highly insignificant. Conversely, PROTO was significant at the 99% threshold ($p = 0.001$).

Puzzlingly, these results suggest that external unilateral support (whether economic, military, or political) does not seem to affect the secessionists' chances of survival when controlling for the presence of impartial PKOs. This is in contrast with the studies emphasising the role of external actors in securing secessionists' ability to establish and maintain their monopoly of violence (e.g. Blakkisrud & Kølsto, 2011; Florea, 2020). When breaking down the indicators and contextualising them, however, the picture becomes more complex.

First of all, the above mentioned studies on external interventions mostly focus on de-facto or quasi-states, that is, on a specific kind of secessionist entity. This analysis, however, goes beyond this limitation by including *all* tactical variations of secessionist violence. Therefore, it might be that external state support has a significant effect on de-facto state institutions, while not

aiding other types of secessionist entities that do not firmly establish such structures. The fact that the variable measuring political support from an external state actor (EXTERNAL) remains insignificant throughout both models mirrors Florea's (2020) finding that international recognition does not facilitate institutional development in de-facto states. Conversely, it stands in contrast with the same author's earlier finding that external political support and international recognition are significantly correlated with a lower chance for de-facto states to be forcefully reintegrated (Florea, 2017).

A particularly unexpected finding is the sign of the TROOPWEAPONS variable: negative instead of positive. The variable is not significant in the first place and it is not possible to determine with the current data why that might be the case. *Per se*, however, the result might undermine the intuitive idea that external military assistance is always beneficial to the rebels' side. As usual, particular caution is needed when interpreting this finding insofar as the variable does not take into consideration whether non-UN PKOs were present during the conflict. Ideally, the variable ought to be further disaggregated in order to draw more robust conclusions. Unfortunately, this endeavour is complicated by the dearth of consistent data on non-UN PKOs. In fact, the most systematic study on SD violence currently available (Griffiths and Wasser, 2019) does not systematically investigate the effect of external interventions on the secessionist' chances of success. Therefore, it is not possible to compare these results with more accurate and sophisticated models.

Evidently, more research is needed to break down the extent and type of external support in SD conflicts, especially in the context of direct military interventions. While San-Akca's (2016) work and the International Military Intervention Dataset (IMI) (Kisangani & Pickering, 2008) constitute a first step towards this direction, they still do not cover all relevant cases. More evidence

is needed to determine the extent to which external state interventions affect the outcome of secessionist conflicts in general.

Overall, it remains unclear whether these unexpected results can be ascribed to the fact that the studies on de-facto states do not cover the entire population of secessionist cases, to omitted third-variable bias, or to a combination of both. The same insights apply to the FRAGMENTATION variable: Florea (2017, 2020) found it non-significant in most of the scenarios they analysed, despite Kraus's (2017) argument that fragmented SD movements are considerably less likely to achieve their goals. An intuitive explanation for why fragmentation might result insignificant despite its theoretical relevance is how common the phenomenon is (Bakke, Cunningham, & Seymour, 2012): 64% of the SD movements included in this study experienced fragmentation. Once again, new research could focus on disaggregating actors to distinguish between those who are effectively involved in the conflict and those who instead do not engage in violent acts (cf. San-Akca, 2016).

Florea's (2020) observation that leftist SD movements are better equipped to create and sustain governance institutions and subsequently facilitate survival does not seem apply to the broader population of secessionist movements, with the LEFT variable failing to reach significance at any conventional level ($p = 0.466$).

On the other hand, the high level of significance of the PROTO variable is fully consistent with the strand of SD literature emphasizing administrative lines as fundamental predictors of secessionist success (cf. Roeder, 2018). This finding is relatively unsurprising: in reference to violent secessionism, Griffiths concludes that "Administrative architecture shapes the response of metropolises to secessionist demands. Secessionist movements that lack a proto-state are unlikely to be permitted independence" (Griffiths, 2015, p. 748). This also highlights the role of pre-

established administrative lines in shaping the secessionists' strategic field and threat environment: when secessionists fight over clearly-defined territories, they might not only be considered more legitimate but could also benefit from the above-mentioned tactical and strategic advantages that strong territorial attachments entail (such as lower information costs and positional advantages).

5.3. Model 3

Model 3 confirms the majority of the previous results by testing for a variety of control variables. Once again, UNPKO is significant at the 95% threshold ($p = 0.033$). None of the variables indicating external state intervention reached significance; EXTERNAL becomes more significant ($p = 0.088$) yet the change is too small to reach the 95% threshold. PROTO remains significant at the 99% level ($p = 0.006$), while FRAGMENTATION and LEFT remain highly insignificant.

SEASHORE is highly insignificant ($p = 0.312$) whereas LANDBORDER is significant at the 95% threshold ($p = 0.047$). The coefficient is negative, meaning that when a secessionist movement shares a land border with a sovereign state, it is *less* likely to survive than movements that do not. This finding could be interpreted in different ways. From a reputational perspective, sovereign states will tend to avoid supporting nearby secessionist groups. This is so that they can send costly signals to domestic SD movements and prevent them from rebelling (Walter, 2009). From a strategic perspective, some state actors might actively collaborate with neighbouring countries to repress the rebels. For example, France and Spain cooperated to extirpate ETA, the armed faction of the Basque SD movement (Hamon, 2012).

A related strand of literature on external state interventions in secessionist conflicts asks whether the presence of kin groups in neighbouring countries facilitates secession. This study found the KIN variable to be extremely insignificant ($p = 0.964$). Perhaps counter-intuitively, this

is in line with Nagle's (2013) theory that having a kin group in a neighbouring state *decreases* the likelihood of violent separatism. It is worth noting that Nagle's study does not extend to cases where secessionist violence has already broken out (as this study does). Recent scholarship called attention to the role played by kin states in intensifying and inflaming conflictual para-diplomacy of non-central government entities (e.g., the France-Quebec relationship) (Cantir, 2020). Nevertheless, more research is needed to conceptualise and explain how kin material and financial assistance shapes the secessionists' threat environment.

Interestingly, the presence of hydrocarbon reserves within the secessionists' territory does not seem to significantly alter their chances of survival ($p = 0.782$), even though the variable's coefficient is positive as expected. Once more, hydrocarbon resources might be essential for de-facto state-building but less relevant in other contexts. It is also worth mentioning that the presence of raw materials is still known to have a positive impact on external actors' propensity to intervene in the conflict, as the Katangese and Abkhazian wars illustrate (e.g. Larmer, 2014; Peña-Ramos, 2017).

GROUPCON was found to be non-significant ($p = 0.337$), while EXCLUDED was instead significant at the 95% threshold ($p = 0.041$). The latter finding suggests that secessionist movements representing groups that are consistently excluded from political power are more likely to survive than non-excluded movements. It is unclear whether this result is biased by endogeneity, that is, whether the variable is significant because of a third unaccounted factor in the model. It might be that, for instance, excluded SD groups are more likely to survive insofar as their exclusion derives from geographical isolation, which in turn increases their strategic and positional advantages. That fact that the SEASHORE variable is highly insignificant seems to undermine this

proposition. Considering the aforementioned high likelihood of false positives and negatives, it might be inopportune to draw anything but tentative conclusions.

Finally, UCDP_CUMULATIVEINTENSITY did not reach any meaningful threshold ($p = 0.256$). This suggests that there might not be a significant correlation between conflict intensity and the secessionists' chances to survive. It does not follow, however, that overall conflict intensity is an unimportant factor in determining whether external actors and especially PKOs will intervene. The scholarship on the determinants of external state intervention in intrastate conflicts is somehow inconclusive in this regard (cf. Fortna, 2008; Rost & Greig, 2011). What these findings indicate, however, is that in the context of secessionist conflicts the number of battle-related deaths does not seem to be correlated with their outcome.

6. Conclusion

The main goal of this thesis was to test Fortna's (2008) and Florea's (2020) claims that the deployment of impartial peacekeepers in secessionist conflicts might inadvertently increase the rebels' chances of success. In doing so, the difference between UN PKOs and non-UN PKOs was highlighted by arguing that the former's impartial stance might counter-intuitively reduce the chances of peaceful settlement, and thus, of secessionist reintegration. From a strategic and tactical level, it was argued that a variety of interrelated mechanisms contributed to the process: not only UN PKOs might isolate the combatants and contain violence but they could also indirectly promote state-building and the secessionists' long-term survival by legitimising their territorial presence.

A multilinear regression was run to test the study's key hypothesis (*The deployment of a UN PKO in a secessionist conflict increases the secessionists' chance of survival*). It was found that a significant, positive correlation exists between the presence of a UN PKO and the SD movement chances of success in terms of survival years, starting from the moment it obtains the monopoly of violence over the territory it claims. Contrary to expectations, it was found that other types of external interventions by state actors did not significantly affect secessionist chances. On the other hand, the findings seem to further support the idea that pre-established administrative lines and proto-states facilitate secessionism (e.g. Roeder, 2018).

Overall, this thesis contributes to the literature in a number of ways. Firstly, it sheds light into Fortna's (2008) original intuition that the presence of peacekeepers might improve the secessionists' chances of success by suggesting that different types of external interventions might have different effects on the conflict outcome. This study found that *only* the specific presence of UN PKOs is significantly correlated with the secessionists' chances of survival. This is a partial finding in that it does not take into consideration whether other, non-UN PKOs were involved in

the conflict; nor could this study directly determine which of the aforementioned causal mechanisms is responsible for the effect.

Nonetheless, it still represents a relevant result insofar as it urges researchers to disaggregate between different types of external interventions and distinguish between secessionist movements that strictly privilege state building (e.g. de-facto states) and those that do not. Exploring the role of neutrality in the context of secessionism may constitute an avenue for future research, especially considering the increasing tendency in the literature to question UN impartiality (e.g. Rhoads, 2016). Furthermore, IOs diplomatic mediation in SD conflicts constitutes an under-explored field that ought to be investigated more.

From a methodological perspective, this study calls attention to the lack of consistent typologies and data collections on secessionist conflicts. This not only severely limited the theoretical and empirical scope of the analysis but it also exposed it to a high-risk of spurious findings. Unfortunately, the currently available data is tendentially dated (as exemplified by the fact that several datasets still rely on Fearon and Laitin's [2003] data) and ought to be updated to reflect recent developments in SD conflicts. In order to reach more substantial conclusions, it would be opportune to replicate the present study by increasing the number of cases and employing conflict-years as the main unit of analysis, as Florea (2020) already attempted. This would yield a more detailed and sophisticated picture of the effect of external interventions on SD conflicts.

Finally, from a societal perspective this study pinpoints the UN (and other IOs) contradictory behaviour vis-à-vis the issue of non-colonial self-determination. Indeed, if on one hand normative condemnation seems to be the most common response (e.g. Ker-Lindsay, 2018), on a practical level their inability to put forward a coherent international legal framework and strategies of action might be potentially leading to unintended, if not opposite results (as this study

suggests). Therefore, policymakers might want to pay particular attention to the unexpected, long-term consequences of peacekeeping as a conflict-management tool and how it potentially clashes with the already-existing legal frameworks on self-determination. Consequently, they could scrutinise why peacekeeping might constitute an effective strategy for abating violence and reducing conflict – but not necessarily for *solving* it.

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