Irredentism

Definition: From Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable

The name given to national minority movements seeking to break away from alien rule and to join up with neighbours of their own nationality and language. It derives from Italia irredenta ('unredeemed Italy'), the name given by the Italians, between 1861 and 1920, to those Italian-speaking areas still under foreign rule. When the kingdom of Italy was formed in 1861, Venetia, Rome, Trieste, the Trentino, Nice and elsewhere were not included.

Summary Article: Irredentism

From International Encyclopedia of Political Science

The term irredentism is derived from the Italian word irredenta (unredeemed). It originally referred to an Italian political movement during the late 1800s and early 1900s that sought to detach predominantly Italian-speaking areas from Switzerland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and incorporate these territories into the new Italian state, thus "redeeming" these territories. Modern usage denotes territorial claims based on a national, ethnic, or historical basis. In many cases, an irredentist movement is referred to as creating a "Greater X," with the "X" being the name of a nation or state—for example, the quest for a Greater Serbia was in part responsible for the Wars of Yugoslav Succession during the 1990s, and the Greater Romania project (România Mare) was partially responsible for Romania siding with the Axis powers during World War II. It is related to, but distinct from, secession: Irredentism is the process by which a part of an existing state breaks away and merges with another, whereas in secession merging does not take place. The importance of irredentism in international relations is based on the intersection between nationalism and the causes of war; because such a movement invariably means taking land from another state, irredentist claims have been known to provoke ethnic conflicts and territorial aggression. The continued discord between nations and states means that the potential for irredentist wars remains serious. This entry identifies some notable cases, provides examples of how irredentist claims are sometimes enshrined in state constitutions, and reviews the literature on this phenomenon.

Notable examples of irredentism include Nazi Germany's claims on the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia; the "Megali Idea" that sought to create a Greater Greece; China's desire to reincorporate the territories lost during periods of historical weakness; Somalia's invasion of Ethiopia during the Ogaden War of 1977-1978; the attempt by Hungary to reverse the 1920 Treaty of Trianon and reclaim territories in Slovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia during World War II; and the continuing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh region. More questionable cases include those without a direct ethnic component but rather based solely on historical claims, such as Argentina's invasion of the British-populated Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) in 1982 or Serbian claims to Kosovo, which was the birthplace of Serbian nationalism but is now populated overwhelmingly by ethnic Albanians. However, these territories could also be considered "unredeemed," and therefore, these cases can fall under the category of irredentism.

In some instances, states have gone so far as to incorporate irredentist claims directly into their
constitution. For example, Argentina claims that recovering the Falkland Islands is “a permanent and unrelinquished goal of the Argentine people,” and China considers Taiwan to be part of the country’s “sacred territory.” The 1937 Irish constitution originally laid claim to the entire island of Ireland, but this was changed following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Despite the numerous potential cases of irredentism, and the long history of these claims sparking armed conflict, there has been surprisingly little scholarly research done on this topic, and no consensus position on its causes, dynamics, or resolution has emerged. However, five explanatory categories can be identified: (1) structural, (2) realist, (3) rational choice, (4) domestic, and (5) constructivist. Given the complexity of irredentism, there are likely multiple and overlapping explanations for any particular case.

Structural explanations argue that the international or regional context within which the potentially irredentist state operates will play a large role in determining whether such a project is initiated and the conditions under which it ends. In most cases, this focuses on the relative support in the international system for state sovereignty versus national self-determination. If the latter is emphasized, then nationalist claims will be allowed to override the inviolability of sovereign borders; if the former is emphasized, then the legitimacy of irredentist claims will be widely rejected. The dramatic increase in irredentist conflicts during periods of major international upheaval and normative reordering is seen as important evidence in favor of this position.

Realist arguments emphasize the relative balance of power between the irredentist state in question and either the target state or the international community. In the first case, military weakness vis-à-vis the target state will force the irredentist country to relinquish its claims; in contrast, relative military strength will precipitate such a project. A weak Albania had little chance of forcibly altering its border with Yugoslavia, but a strong Nazi Germany could pressure France and Great Britain to force territorial revisions on Czechoslovakia. The latter argument takes the balance of power to a higher level by examining the degree to which relevant international actors (states or international organizations) acquiesce in or tolerate the policies of specific irredentist states. The more tolerant they are, the more an irredentist state can get away with; if they are less tolerant, then an irredentist state is forced to temper or restrict its policies. During the early years of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession, the international community did little other than rhetorical condemnation to stop Croatia’s and Serbia’s irredentist projects. However, once key states (particularly the United States) adopted a more robust and muscular stance, then both countries recognized the prewar borders of the Yugoslav republics.

Rational choice accounts examine the decision-making processes of elites that initiate an irredentist conflict for instrumental purposes. Two arguments fall under this rubric: elite conflict and diversionary theory. Under the first explanation, leaders will attempt to use irredentism as a tool to counter challenges from other elites by appealing to the nationalist sentiments of the populace. For example, Slobodan Milošević used irredentist claims in Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina to rise to political preeminence in Serbia. According to the latter argument, decision makers will initiate an irredentist conflict to divert the attention of their population from domestic problems. Argentina’s invasion of the Falkland Islands to prop up the military junta is often considered a classic case of diversionary war theory.

Domestic-level explanations also come in two forms: demographics and regime type. The first argument holds that ethnically homogeneous states are more likely to be irredentist because the populations of ethnically divided states will be unwilling to support a project that benefits only one
group and might have the effect of altering the ethnic balance of the state if successful. For example, given the serious discordance between ethnicity and statehood in nearly all African states, it should not be surprising that the only substantial irredentist conflict was the one launched by ethnically homogeneous Somalia. The second explanation argues that democratic states are less likely to have irredentist-type conflicts between them because of increased institutional restraints on launching an irredentist project; enhanced protection for minority groups, which undermines the reasons for moving to protect one’s diaspora; membership or possible membership in international organizations that prohibit such claims (e.g., North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] or the European Union); and the dynamics of democratic peace theory, in which democratic states tend to resolve their disputes peacefully. The reduction in tensions between Hungary, on the one hand, and Romania and Slovakia, on the other, was associated with the consolidation of democracy in these countries, whereas nearly all irredentist conflicts were initiated by authoritarian regimes.

The final explanation for irredentism is derived from the insights of constructivism, which holds generally that the social construction of ideas and concepts is instrumental in determining political outcomes. When applied to the issue of irredentism, two arguments emerge. The first asserts that the type of national identity that is dominant in a particular state or nation will influence the degree to which it will become irredentist: An ethnic identity emphasizes the unity of the culturally based nation across political boundaries and lends itself to the promotion of altering borders to realize a physical union of the nation; a civic national identity is political in nature, usually tied to a preexisting state, and is therefore more easily limited to status quo boundaries. Some 25 million ethnic Russians found themselves as minorities scattered throughout the former Soviet Union on its collapse. However, despite the fact that many of these Russians were in territories contiguous to Russia itself, the association of the Russian Federation (Rossiyskaya Federatsiya) with the concept of rossiiski (civic) rather than russkii (ethnic) dampened the legitimacy of an irredentist project aimed at creating a Greater Russia in the 1990s. By contrast, ethnically based national identities, such as that found in Nazi Germany, more easily lend themselves toward a desire for unification. The second constructivist argument focuses on the ways in which the irredentist claims are justified in a society. This justification includes the arguments that assert the group’s right and obligation to unify the nation and the proper means by which to achieve this goal. The potential for irredentism can be reduced if this justification is somehow undermined, perhaps by reconceptualizing the nation's history, the physical boundaries of the nation, or the place of the nation in the international community. The belief that Serbia was obligated to protect its fellow Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, when mixed with the conception of the Serb nation as the defenders of Europe against Islam, helped fuel the quest for a Greater Serbia. By contrast, Germany’s renunciation of aggression after World War II and the self-described role of facilitator of Pan-European cooperation precluded adjustments in the country’s post-World War II borders.

See also
Diaspora, Ethnicity, Nationalism, War and Peace

Further Readings

- Kornprobst, M. Dejustification and dispute settlement: Irredentism in European politics. European

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