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## The Geopolitics of State Recognition in a Transitional International Order

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how the geopolitical rivalries and tensions associated with multipolarity in a transitional international order, driven by shifts in great power influence, are shaping the international politics of state recognition. It considers the diplomatic discourse and practices of traditional great powers and resurgent states in relation to a number of controversial cases of territories seeking independent statehood and recognition. Although contested claims for sovereign statehood and recognition predate the current great power constellation, we find that contemporary state recognition practices offer dominant powers grounds for normative and geopolitical contestation with their rivals. Whilst this is a reflection of the historical continuities of great power politics, the article shows that the transitional international order, and the friction this generates, has further fragmented the norms and practices of state recognition. At the same time, there has not been a broad upheaval in the politics of state recognition because most states maintain a conservative attitude to state creation. The article contributes to contemporary debates on statehood and recognition by revealing how the political and normative friction associated with the changing international order make the possibility of a rigorous, rules-based regime for regulating international recognition more remote than ever.

### Introduction

This article explores how the transitional international order – defined here as the geopolitical, normative and institutional changes which occur as key states rise and fall in relative power and influence – is shaping the international politics of state recognition. While the requirements for sovereign statehood are established in principle, the practice of international recognition occurs in a political and legal grey area which is influenced by great power rivalries, normative contestation, and sometimes arbitrariness. Important recent cases – such as Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia – have been particularly divisive and raise questions about the impact of unilateral recognition by powerful

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states and a possible shift away from international consensus on the recognition of new states. International recognition has long been decentralised, political, and closely tied to the whims and interests of great powers (Muro 2017; Cunningham 2014; Kinne 2014; Coggins 2014). However, vying positions on recognition by powerful states suggests a heightened fragmentation of the norms and practices which govern international recognition. The focus of this article – and its principal contribution – is to specifically explore if the politics and practices of international recognition are facing an upheaval in the context of renewed great power friction.

The article will explore this research question by gauging a number of ways in which the transitional international order, associated with multiple regional powers and interests as well as fragmented institutions, norms, and alliances, may be shaping the politics and practices of state recognition. The first theme concerns the politics of international recognition as an arena of renewed geopolitical rivalry, reflected in patterns of conflicting practice amongst rival regional powers and within existing alliances. Is there a distinct split, in key cases of disputed recognition – such as Kosovo or Palestine – between powers which promote the status quo and their rising rivals who want to shape the terms of recognition? Powerful states – such as the US, China, and Russia – often take opposing sides on self-determination conflicts, resulting in a number of new states that enjoy only partial membership of international society. These territories – which are often *de facto* states – are a political battlefield for conflicting great power agendas and proxy struggles. Although this is far from a new phenomenon, the analysis here will explore if this conflict reflects the current changing balance of power between rivals and sometimes amongst allies. We observe that contemporary practices of state recognition expose the prevalence of pragmatic and *realpolitik* multipolarity in world politics (see also Siroky, Popovic, and Mirilovic 2020). In particular, these practices demonstrate the weakening of Western great powers and the global rise of China along with the resurgence of Russia, and other regional powers.

The second theme relates to normative contestation associated with the transitional international order and multipolarity, and the extent to which it is relevant to evolving international recognition politics and practices. Normative contestation entails disagreement among states over the meaning and application of international norms – standards of behaviour reflected in general practice – to specific situations (Simmons and Jo 2019; Wiener 2018). This contestation is manifested in relation to existing or emerging norms, and can result in resistance, adaptation, or eventual internalisation of norms by states or regional grouping of states (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020). In this scenario of normative contestation, the question is whether practices and discourses of recognition reflect a tension between a conservative legal interpretation of recognition, which emphasises territorial integrity and state

sovereignty – a ‘pluralist’ worldview often associated with ‘rising’ non-Western powers such as the BRICS grouping (Hurrell 2018) – and on the other hand an evolving, more liberal approach to international recognition which recognises ‘remedial secession’ in the interests of justice, human rights and democracy. This evolving view of international recognition reflects an expanded understanding of the principles of self-determination and popular sovereignty beyond decolonisation. In this second scenario, international recognition is a key site of normative contestation in relation to the evolving international order.

The article is organised around these themes. It explores the history and politics of international recognition as an arena of great power rivalry, and identifies patterns of practices amongst competing powers in terms of recognition. Then, the article explores if normative contestation associated with the transitional international order – including opposing worldviews amongst allies – is relevant to evolving international recognition politics. Following this, the article explores if and how the heightened geopolitical friction associated with multipolarity plays a role in debates and decisions about recognition. International recognition appears to be increasingly about politics rather than law; according to Cedric Ryngaert and Sobrie (2011: 467 and 490), the rules governing the process of state recognition are in “existential crisis” due to their “uncertainty and incoherence”. A core objective for this article is to explore if this incoherence is in some way driven, or exacerbated, by changing interests and fragmentation amongst Western allies, and a resurgence of geopolitical rivalry in world politics, with reference to cases involving the north Atlantic states, China, and Russia. It uses archival discourse analysis and draws upon illustrative case studies in order to test these theoretical scenarios.

The article finds that a number of recognition disputes have become theatres of political conflict which reflect the tensions of the changing international order. However, there has not been a widespread upheaval of international recognition practices linked to renewed geopolitical rivalry or normative contestation, because the international system remains essentially conservative and resistant to territorial changes. Most states share an interest in obstructing the unregulated secession of territorial entities and the establishment of new states when this is in tension with the norm of territorial integrity. At the same time, friction associated with the transitional international order has had an impact upon recognition politics in other ways. The evolving politics of international recognition reflects a gradual decline of collective Western influence in international politics since the immediate post-Cold War period, when Western states supervised the independence and then the recognition of Kosovo. In particular, the field of state recognition exposes fragmentation within the liberal international order which had in the post-

Second World War era come to signify “the American-led system of alliances, institutions, and global governance” (see Cooley and Nexon 2020, 2).

In a number of cases recognition disputes have become a focus for broad geopolitical rivalry in a manner which demonstrates the growing authority of resurgent states. In addition, the article suggests that there is evidence of a shift to unilateral recognition – and thus some erosion of the international consensus on international recognition – by some powerful states, in the context of broader stresses facing the rules-based international order. As a part of this, there are also signs of ultra-realpolitik behaviour amongst some powerful states, involving a de facto acquiescence of each others’ unilateral recognition practices. In line with this, the political and normative friction associated with the changing international order makes the possibility of a rigorous, rules-based regime for international recognition more remote than ever.

### **The Evolution of State Recognition and the Transition to a Multipolar Order**

Recognition has emerged as a defining feature of the cartography of states with far reaching implications for international peace, security and development. In addition to 193 UN member states, there is a spectrum of states with different degrees of recognition. Palestine and Kosovo are recognised by over 100 states, followed by Western Sahara and Taiwan which are recognised by less than 40 states. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are recognised by less than 10 states, and Northern Cyprus, Artsakh, Somaliland, and Transnistria have little or no formal recognition (Caspersen 2012). There are also over 50 partially independent territories which have not proclaimed independence but enjoy an autonomous status and often act like states, and 17 non-self-governing territories which remain to be decolonised and are potential candidates for independent statehood (Rezvani 2014). Partially recognised and de facto states enjoy most of the attributes of independent statehood and have empirical sovereignty over the territory they control. They are state-like entities which often function better than some UN member states. But, their claim to statehood is contested and often undermined by the former base state and others. Often contestation is a consequence of the pathway to self-determination – namely the non-consensual proclamation of independence – but it also arises from conflicting geopolitical interests among great power rivals (Coggins 2014). This multi-layered tapestry of the cartography of states – consisting of recognised, partially recognised and unrecognised states – has become both a source of tension among great powers as well as an opportunity for rising powers to challenge the existing international order.

The formal requirements of sovereign statehood have, in principle, reflected general international agreement since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, linked to settled norms which underpin international order. However, the practice of

international recognition has often been ad hoc (Bartelson 2016), and international recognition is one of the most unregulated and de-centralised aspects of international relations (Visoka, Doyle, and Newman 2020), in the absence of a rigorous normative framework and institutionalised procedures to regulate it. The international recognition of new states is often politically and legally sensitive, particularly where the legal sovereignty of an entity seeking recognition is contested, whether by the immediate parties to the dispute or by other states. This is partly a function of the disagreement which exists on the definition of the state in international law. The Montevideo Convention of 1933 has become a global reference on the core conditions of statehood, which are a defined territory, a permanent population, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. However, the role of recognition in supporting claims to statehood remains contested. Some scholars claim that recognition is a constitutive element and an essential precondition of independent statehood (Brownlie 2008; Jackson 2000), while others see the existence of sovereign statehood, based upon the inherent merits of the territory concerned, as something that is independent of recognition by other states (Lauterpacht 1944).

Although legal doctrine governs the conferment of statehood and the interactions of states, the process by which some entities become recognised as states and others do not is also largely political and sometimes quite arbitrary. Despite some efforts following the Second World War to delegate the right of state recognition to the UN – and thus institutionalise collective recognition – states could not agree to such an approach. There is therefore no regime to objectively apply criteria for international recognition or enforce a duty to recognise new states (Tierney 2013). Rynjaert and Sobrie (2011, 484) thus argue that “the lack of a clear-cut normative framework gives way to uncertainty and incoherent policies”. Rationales for recognition in practice are generally driven by the self-interest of recognising states, although this may be guided by a range of factors, including alliance commitments and normative standpoint. As Bridget Coggins (2014, 38) suggests, “states have competing impulses when it comes to recognition. One is toward unilateral, competitive recognition in service of parochial interests; the other is toward multilateral, coordinated recognition to serve both short- and longer-term goals”. This leads to overlapping practices of bilateral and collective recognition and non-recognition by states, increasingly shaped by international and regional organisations.

In this context, certain norms have evolved, such as a tendency for states to recognise new states collectively rather than unilaterally, and the idea that membership of the United Nations is a general confirmation of international recognition and sovereign statehood (Dugard 1987). Prevailing norms thus tend to give primacy to state sovereignty and territorial integrity over self-determination and secession, and discourage the recognition of states

emerging from acts of aggression. Territorial integrity as an evolving norm has come to enjoy wide support internationally in the post-1945 world order. It is associated with the right to statehood for existing states and against the alteration of state frontiers through the use of military force (Fabry 2002). The norm of political self-determination, on the other hand, ambiguously prescribes the rights of peoples to form an independent state – though mostly in the context of colonialism or occupation (see Fisch 2015). However, in recent years there have been a number of high profile and controversial cases of recognition by powerful states which are not based upon this consensus and which have had implications for other contested cases. In a number of ways, these controversies and divisions can be linked to changes in the international order, given that the most powerful states are the key actors in both the international order and in international recognition practices.

The ‘international order’ – in the sense of a coherent, unified set of practices or principles – is a problematic concept that is often not upheld in reality (Acharya 2014; Ikenberry 2011; Schweller 2011; Stuenkel 2016; Luban 2020; Cooley, Nexon, and Ward 2019). As others (for example, Porter 2020) have observed, the coherence and validity of the ‘liberal’ international order is highly questionable. In reality, the construction is largely a euphemism for the hegemony of great powers which condition others to comply with their interests, “partially through institutions and norms and partially through the smack of coercion” (Porter 2020, 2). Nevertheless, the concept of international order is not entirely devoid of meaning and can be defined by the norms and institutions which regulate international politics, reflected in the behaviour of states and other actors (Newman and Zala 2018). Fundamental norms relate to state sovereignty, the rules governing the use of armed force, and diplomatic practice, amongst others. Multilateral arrangements are the collective means of managing international interactions around these norms. This order is often associated with the distribution or balance of economic and military power, or the perception of such power, but it is importantly also a matter of norms which guide or proscribe behaviour. In broader context, a changing international order might be a consequence of a sustained change in the distribution of power, especially when associated with the relative rise and fall of states that has an impact upon international norms. It is in this sense that international norms and institutions are under transition and arguably under challenge (Newman 2018).

According to some analysts, the relative rise in power of a number of non-Western states has resulted in a process of normative contestation and resistance in international politics, and questions relating to the creation, internalisation and institutionalisation of norms are increasingly controversial (Amitav 2014; Amitav 2017; Stuenkel 2016; Xiaoyu 2012). According to this perspective, non-Western powers are increasingly unwilling to be passive ‘norm takers’, and various forms of normative resistance and counter-

hegemonic action can be seen in relation to a number of issues, such as conflict resolution, the promotion of human rights, and governance reforms (Li 2014). Divergence between the Western powers on both sides of the Atlantic and Russia is clearly not new. In the contemporary iteration, friction took place in the early 1990s when the US attempted to promote a liberal and democratic order, while Russia sought a transformed and reconfigured European security architecture in the context of global multipolarity. In particular, Russia grew hostile towards the West's intention to "stay the same and enlarge" while expecting Russia "to change to reflect the assumed new power and normative realities" (Sakwa 2017, 6). US exceptionalism and dominance in the global stage pushed Russia to radicalise, resist and assume a counter-hegemonic stance (see Allison 2013). The recognition and non-recognition of new states has been one of the battlefields where this friction has been manifested in the wider European context but also elsewhere.

In addition, the manner in which decisions are made and upheld through multilateral governance is also increasingly fractious. Many ongoing international challenges occur against the background of this apparently changing international order, and appear to reflect a growing division between dominant states – mostly located in the global north – and 'rising' powers, including China, India, and Brazil in the global south. This contestation reflects differences around fundamental norms – such as state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the use of force – and the rising power narrative often reads as an expression of resistance to liberal norms related to human rights, development, and governance. But contestation also reflects a desire amongst non-Western and counter-hegemonic powers for greater control of the agenda, a desire for sovereign equality and respect (Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014; Volgy et al. 2011). This is a form of international contestation, but not a challenge to the fundamental principles which underpin international order (Newman and Zala 2018). In this context, the unregulated norms and practices relating to state recognition offer emerging powers a vehicle for exercising influence, expressing demands for international status, and defying what is perceived to be the West's attempts to maintain its hegemony (Visoka 2021).

In connection with this, the distinction between the 'pluralist' – reflecting a conservative, legal view of sovereignty and territorial integrity (Hurrell 2007, 2013) – and the liberal worldview may in some ways characterise the normative contestation of the transitional international order. According to this, rising powers tend to project a commitment (in theory) to strict statist norms of non-intervention, territorial integrity, and respect for state sovereignty. This worldview sees no grounds for international judgements about the legitimacy of national governments in relation to domestic issues apart from in the most exceptional circumstances, and state legitimacy is assumed (Newman and Zala 2018). This contrasts with a liberal internationalist worldview which – at least



in theory – gives greater emphasis to universal human rights, democracy, and the international rules which govern state behaviour (Ikenberry 2011). From this perspective, state sovereignty is increasingly conditional, and issues such as economic and political governance, and human rights, can no longer be legitimately regarded as exclusively domestic issues.

In this context, Cooley (2015) for example sees contestation as a deliberate agenda on the part of non-Western states to resist pressure to democratise and to reinforce the principle of sovereign jurisdiction: an ‘international backlash against liberal democracy’. For Laïdi (2012, 614), this agenda is not a coherent vision, but a ‘coalition of sovereign state defenders’, resisting perceived incursions into the sovereignty norm brought by interdependence and interventionist political norms: ‘the BRICS – even the democratic ones – fundamentally diverge from the liberal vision of Western countries’. This may shape the attitudes of states such as China, Russia, India and Brazil in terms of the types of circumstances in which they recognise new sovereign states. Within multilateral processes and decisions, this kind of contestation can have an impact if cases of international recognition become embroiled in vying political agendas, with Kosovo and Palestine being key examples in relation to regional and global rivalries.

The practice of state recognition has always been in flux, and never a stable element of any order. It has, historically, often been used as an instrument to promote influence and weaken rival powers (see Fabry 2010; Griffiths 2017). France and Spain recognised the United States of America to weaken Britain. Subsequently, the US recognised emerging Latin American states to weaken European influence in the Americas. In turn, the recognition of new states in the Balkans and the Middle East following the First World War – associated with the Wilsonian principle of self-determination – aimed to reshuffle the geopolitical interests of remaining dominant powers as the Ottoman Empire collapsed. After the Second World War, the Soviet Union used political and military aid to push for national self-determination and decolonisation struggles, which successfully resulted in weakening British and French influence in Africa and Asia. Following the decolonisation process, the violent dissolution of the Yugoslav and Soviet federations resulted in the creation and recognition of a considerable number of new states, which then was followed by unilateral secession of sub-units of these federations more recently. The European community sought to set guidelines for the recognition of new states in Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space, in a movement towards regulating and unifying international responses to state creation and recognition. However, that practice was short-lived as the EU and other regional and international bodies have failed to set common policies on state recognition (Newman and Visoka 2018a).

In a multipolar order there is no normative consensus or regulatory regime to guide state recognition. Rather, there is context-specific consensus and

uneven responses on the part of great powers that suit their rhetorical and geopolitical interests. These patterns have become even more prevalent recently (see [Table 1](#)). Russia resists recognition of most of the break-away regions in the former soviet space because the frozen conflicts there obstruct the eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO (see [De Waal and Von Twickel 2020](#)). Non-recognition creates the conditions of political precarity, which turns these unrecognised or partially recognised states into grey zones where the norms, laws, and mechanisms governing state relations do not effectively function. Similarly, although the US does not recognise Taiwan as a sovereign and independent state, in recent years it has stepped up efforts to put pressure on states not to switch recognition in favour of mainland China. This aims to undermine China's international standing, but also prevents China's expansion in regions, such as Latin America and the Pacific region, where the US and its allies, such as Australia and New Zealand, have traditionally been the dominant actors (see [Mazza 2020](#)). Russia has aided Serbia's campaign for derecognition of Kosovo as a strategic move to deepen ties with Serbia and hence expand its influence in the Balkans, but also to antagonise the US and other western powers by showing how their global influence is fading (see [Bechev 2019](#)). Moreover, by pushing for derecognition of Kosovo, Russia intends to reverse the US and Western approach to state creation and recognition and retain the consensual nature of state recognition. Achieving consensus on state recognition would entail a compromise which would enhance Russia's bargaining power and restore its status as a global player. So, by holding on to an effective veto on which entities can be recognised as sovereign states, dominant powers enhance their own status as great powers. The politics of recognition allows states to demonstrate their influence and exercise resistance, and Russia, for example, as a key example, has expressed its resurgence in this manner.

Regional power complexes have also influenced the practice of regional powers and smaller states in their surrounding areas or spheres of influence. For example, the US more or less shapes how the EU states respond to secession elsewhere (with the exception of four EU countries which do not recognise Kosovo). Russia influences the response of central Asian states. Similarly, China influences countries in its region, and South Africa influences parts of Africa in terms of their response to recognition claims. In short, multipolarity is a symptom of a widespread distribution of power to several regional hegemonies, where it is expected that multiple normative justifications for state recognition will emerge. In this multipolar outlook, some great powers self-identify as a counter-hegemonic force, while framing their rivals as hegemonic. Russia has in particular taken on the role of a counterweighting power to Western strategic moves that are seen as threatening its interests (see [Turner 2009](#), 163). Unless state recognition as an evolving and contentious issue is codified into a legal and institutional framework, global consensus is

**Table 1.** State recognition and external relations: key ‘Western’ and BRICS states.

	Officially recognised	Not officially recognised
Kosovo	France United Kingdom United States	Brazil China India Russia South Africa
Palestine	Brazil China India Russia South Africa	France United States United Kingdom (‘non-member state status’)
Abkhazia	Russia	Brazil China France South Africa United Kingdom
South Ossetia	Russia	United States Brazil China France South Africa United Kingdom
Nagorno-Karabakh		United States Brazil China France Russia South Africa United Kingdom
Transnistria		United States Brazil China France Russia South Africa United Kingdom
Crimea	Russia	United States Brazil China France South Africa United Kingdom
Turkish Republic of North Cyprus		United States Brazil China France Russia South Africa United Kingdom
Eritrea	United States	United States Brazil China France Russia South Africa
Western Sahara	South Africa	United Kingdom Brazil China France Russia United Kingdom United States

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued).

	Officially recognised	Not officially recognised
Somaliland		Brazil China France Russia South Africa United Kingdom United States
South Sudan	Brazil China France Russia South Africa United Kingdom United States	
Taiwan		Brazil China France Russia South Africa United Kingdom United States

unlikely to emerge, especially in a multipolar world order. It is for this reason that the norms and politics of state recognition are constantly challenged in practice (see Mearsheimer 2019, 7). Against this background, the next section will explore how the contested transitional international order may be shaping the evolving politics of state recognition according to a number of scenarios.

## State Recognition as an Arena of Great Power Rivalry

### *Normative Contestation in the Politics of International Recognition*

An important dynamic of the multipolar – and in some ways transitional – international order concerns the prospect of ‘normative contestation’ around the core norms and institutions which shape state behaviour. This contestation is relevant to evolving international recognition politics in a number of ways. One test of this is to consider if liberal – in particular ‘Western’ – democracies are more likely to make decisions in favour of recognition following remedial secession, for example where human rights abuse or the denial of democracy has been a factor in the attempt by a secessionist territory to gain independence and statehood (see Buchanan 2003). In contrast, it might be expected that the (re)emerging powers, often associated with the traditional post-1945 international order, are more likely to resist any evolution or widening of the norms governing state recognition, in the interests of territorial integrity and the norm of sovereignty and non-interference. This question is posed against a historical backdrop. In the early 1990s, with the rise of the human rights discourse in global perspective, there was some hope that democratic legitimacy and justice-based norms would play a more prominent role in guiding

international responses to secession and recognition (Franck 1992; Murphy 1999). A landmark in this evolving normative context was the European Community (1992) attempt – triggered by the fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union but also meant to have broader relevance – to set out conditions for the recognition of new states. The ‘Guidelines on the Recognition of New States in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union’ made explicit reference to human rights, the rights of minorities, democracy, and respect for the UN Charter – all normative standards that went beyond the Montevideo Convention on statehood and set the scene for contestation around recognition (Caplan 2005).

In a number of important cases – including Kosovo and Palestine – the friction which accompanies the changing international circumstances and balance of power is having an impact upon the politics of international recognition. There are patterns of divergent views and splits among allies and between competing powers in terms of decisions to recognise or withhold recognition of statehood. In a prominent case, Kosovo is recognised by the majority of Western states, including most of the members of the EU, the US and the UK, but none of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). The declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008, which was sponsored and supported by the US and many European countries, became a point of conflict specifically between Russia and a number of Western states, but more broadly also between a number of Western and non-Western states. However, a split exists within the EU in relation to Kosovo’s independence. Five EU member states, namely Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia, Spain and Romania, have not (as yet) recognised Kosovo’s independence – largely for domestic reasons – which significantly undermines the EU’s ability to project power and resolve protracted conflicts in the Western Balkans (see Newman and Visoka 2018; Wydra 2020).

The contrasting discourse of Western and BRICS states on international recognition certainly seems to reflect normative contestation around guiding principles but also selective application of norms. Brazil, Russia, India, and China issued statements in relation to Kosovo which underscored the importance of territorial integrity, international law, sovereignty, and the illegitimacy of unilateral secession without the consent of the ‘parent’ state (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the UK 2008; Ministry of External Affairs of India 2008; People’s Republic of China 2009; Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008). Most of them also emphasised the importance of legal norms for regional and international peace and security, and the “very dangerous precedent for similar cases around the world” posed by Kosovo (Ambassador of India to Serbia 2008). None of them referred to or accepted any exceptions to these norms as a result of human rights or issues of democracy. As Brazil stated in relation to Kosovo, “the principle of self-determination must not run counter to the principle of territorial integrity” (Brazilian Ambassador to the

ICJ 2009). This normative invocation notwithstanding, a formidable rationale of rising powers for contesting Kosovo's independence relates to their disagreement with the US's uneven and selective intervention and application of norms to suit its geopolitical interests (see Milanovic and Wood 2015).

In contrast, the narrative of those – generally Western – states which led the promotion of Kosovo's independent statehood has been couched in unmistakably liberal terms. The US statement, following its recognition of Kosovo, referred to the background of “brutal attacks on the Kosovar Albanian population”, and praised the “democratic institutions” that had emerged in Kosovo following NATO's intervention (US Department of State 2008). It also highlighted Kosovo's commitment to “embrace multi-ethnicity as a fundamental principle of good governance”. Whilst the US observed that this is a “special case” and indicated that “Kosovo cannot be seen as a precedent for any other situation in the world today”, the US justification clearly presents a normative perspective that is distinct from that of the BRICS. The UK's statements in support of Kosovo's independent statehood were similarly framed with reference to Kosovo's difficult recent history, the supervision of the international community, and the sensitivities of the region and the importance of minority rights within Kosovo – all of which reflects sympathy with the concept of remedial secession (FCO 2009). France also put its recognition of Kosovo into the context of the region's conflicted past, and suggested that “Independence was achieved with respect for exemplary principles in relation to democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the rights of minorities, and without jeopardizing regional stability” (Republic of France 2009).

Debate around the legal status of Kosovo has also provided a normative and rhetorical battlefield. In 2008 (in Resolution 63/3), the UN General Assembly asked the International Court of Justice to render an advisory opinion on the question: “Is the unilateral declaration of independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo in accordance with international law?” The court's advisory opinion, delivered on 22 July 2010, stated that “the declaration of independence of Kosovo adopted on 17 February 2008 did not violate international law” (International Court of Justice 2010). This provided a further opportunity to test the discursive politics of great power rivalry, and the statements submitted by UN members in relation to this question give further support to the idea of normative contestation in relation to international recognition (Newman and Visoka 2018b). Amongst these statements, countries in support of Kosovo's independent statehood – of which Western states are well represented – were far more likely to underline the troubled history of the region, the abuse of human rights in Kosovo, and the importance of democracy. In contrast, non-Western states emphasised a strict interpretation of international law, territorial integrity, and the importance of (Serbia's) sovereignty (International Court of Justice 2010). It is important not to extrapolate too much from the Kosovo case; the country's supporters, in

recognising its sovereignty, have clearly stated that they see the case as exceptional and not establishing any broader precedent. Yet the divisions which exist in terms of international recognition for Kosovo and the discourse used to justify support or deny the country's statehood reflect a tension between US, UK, France and German spheres of influence and worldviews, and those of Russia, China, and other regional powers, which suggests normative contestation linked to the changing dynamics and the revival of a multipolar order.

Another relevant case of great power normative and institutional contestation is Palestine, which is recognised by all the BRICS countries (and many additional non-Western countries) but not by the US, France or the UK (although the latter gives the territory non-member state status). Again, this is a polarising case which is highly contentious in the context of the politics of the middle east, the Israel-Palestine peace process, and relations with Israel. States which support the status quo argue that the protracted dispute should be resolved through a cooperative peacemaking process based on direct negotiations, thus putting emphasis on the norm of peaceful resolution of disputes (see Dimitris Bouris and İşleyen 2020). In this regard, some third-party states, including most of the EU member states, believe that a 'two state solution' remains a fundamental part of a peace process, but that recognising Palestine can be prejudicial to that eventual goal by putting undue pressure upon Israel (see Council of the European Union 2015). In contrast, many states, mostly from the Arab and non-Western world, believe that Israel has shown insufficient goodwill and commitment to the peace process, and that the need to extend solidarity to the people of Palestine and strengthen their position politically – both in their relationship with Israel but also in international institutions and organisations – is overdue. For instance, China stated that “the establishment of an independent State is an inalienable national right of the Palestinian people” (UN Security Council 2019, 16). In the same debate, South Africa similarly expressed support for Palestine, referring to principles of human rights (*ibid*). However, the EU adheres to UN Security Council resolutions that condemn Israeli settlements and activities in the occupied territories since 1967, a position which is at odds with the US and some other individual Western states. Moreover, the EU's normative ambiguity and the lack of a common state recognition policy (see Müller 2019), has permitted countries such as Sweden in 2014 to recognise Palestine as a sovereign and independent state, linking recognition both to the right to self-determination and confliction resolution.

These fluctuating normative dynamics demonstrate that the politics of state recognition are not only a point of divergence among rivals but also expose cracks between political and military allies. A key example of this is the US's unilaterally change of position on Palestine. In 2017, the US recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and then recognised Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. In November 2019, the Trump administration

contested claims that Israeli's West Bank settlements violated international law, reversing four decades of American policy. The US Secretary of State Pompeo declared that "We've recognized the reality on the ground" (New York Times 2019), and argued: "The hard truth is that there will never be a judicial resolution to the conflict, and arguments about who is right and who is wrong as a matter of international law will not bring peace" (The Guardian 2019). During 2020, the Trump Administration arranged for the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to normalise their ties with Israel and pushed Serbia and Kosovo to move and respectively open their embassies in Jerusalem. These moves are categorically rejected by Palestine, Arab states, the UN, the EU, and Russia.

Even where sensitive material interests are at stake – such as trade and military relations with affected states – and where these interests are the overriding policy driver, normative rhetoric and discursive framings for policies are still significant and have meaning, since this reflects a particular worldview. For example, although the US's interests in relation to Taiwan are predominantly geopolitical it actively invokes normative rationales for informal economic and military bilateral ties despite derecognition from Taiwan in 1975. US elites frequently praise Taiwan's democratic system and commitment to "a free market economy and a vibrant civil society", that makes it "a model for the region and a force for good in the world" (American Institute in Taiwan 2020), as a thinly veiled endorsement of its autonomy. The US 2019 Taiwan Act considers Taiwan as "a free, democratic, and prosperous nation . . . and an important contributor to peace and stability around the world" (US Congress 2020). On these grounds, the US "firmly support[s] Taiwan's relationships with pacific islands nations" (Global Taiwan Institute 2019). However, what foregrounds the US's support for Taiwan is not the democratic character of the latter, but the strategic desire to challenge China and its geopolitical interests in Southeast Asia.

In terms of gauging normative contestation as a key theme in the politics of international recognition, the evidence does not present a coherent picture. Certainly, a simple normative contestation between rival powers – although reflected in the discourse surrounding the Kosovo case – is not borne out across a range of cases in a consistent manner. In broader perspective, although liberal states are more likely to refer to issues such as human rights and governance, and other states are more likely to emphasise state sovereignty and territorial integrity, there is often a disconnect between discourse and behaviour.

### ***Realpolitik Competition of Great Powers***

A number of key studies have demonstrated that the politics of international recognition is fundamentally shaped by great power politics and vying



geopolitical interests (Coggins 2014; Fabry 2010). The creation of new states tends to reshuffle not only the cartography of states but also the power relations and interests of great powers. Great powers tend to support secessionist entities and movements which would either preserve or expand their influence. This reflects a historical pattern. During the Cold War, for example, the US withheld support from the efforts of Biafra, Eritrea, Kurdistan and South Sudan for independent and recognisable statehood fearing that such territories would become allies of the Soviet Union and thus undermine its own influence in these regions (Paquin 2010, 4).

This geopolitical rivalry has become entangled with the shifting international order. In this context, the US is more likely to oppose the expansion of states if the new or nascent states signal strategic alliances with Russia or China, among other competing powers. The US considers the West Balkans to be an important geopolitical zone for preserving and expanding the Euro-Atlantic community and limiting the role of other competing powers. Support for the independence of former Yugoslav republics, including most recently the case of Kosovo, are core to the US's stability-seeking foreign policy. To undermine the US's dominance in the Balkans, Russia proactively opposes Kosovo's independence and supports the nationalist leaders of Republika Srpska, an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina which seeks greater autonomy and eventual separation (Björkdahl 2018; Jackson and Jeffrey 2019). In turn, the US actively opposes the independence of *de facto* states in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, as it considers these breakaway territories to be Russian satellites. The US has thus coordinated its sanctions against Russia with the EU as part of a collective non-recognition policy against the annexation of Crimea in 2013 (see Newman and Visoka 2018). In turn, Russia tends to use these frozen conflicts as a buffer zone to prevent further expansion of the Euro-Atlantic community and liberal democracy. Simultaneously, *de facto* states with different degrees of international recognition tend to exploit great power rivalries to gain political influence and resources, in the hope that the internationalisation of their status will strengthen their campaigns.

Russia's vision for a multipolar world order entails projecting influence in its surrounding regions within and beyond the former soviet space. The Balkans is one of the fields where Russia seeks to push back against the US and EU as dominant powers and "establish itself as a first-rate player in European security affairs" (Bechev 2019: 6. See also Samorukov 2019). International recognition plays a key role in this broader political conflict, and this has fuelled further rivalries between states in the region as well as undermined democratic consolidation and socio-economic development. Russia, in particular, sees the West's sponsorship of Kosovo's independence as highly provocative – as an assertion of Western hegemony broadly – in addition to being counter to its interests. Kosovo's declaration of independence is thus seen as a culmination of Western – and in particular British and

US – involvement in the region, including military intervention in 1999 (see Visoka 2018). Russia and the US along with key EU member states have been active diplomatically in promoting or countering Kosovo's attempts to gain international recognition and representation in multilateral regimes. The politics of contestation is played out in a number of arenas, including supporting or obstructing the membership of Kosovo in international organisations such as UNESCO and INTERPOL. In these and other diplomatic contexts, there is a discursive confrontation between the US and Russia on Kosovo that echoes broader geopolitical friction.

According to some, Russia is not committed to resolving the recognition saga between Serbia and Kosovo. For Samorukov (2019, 1) “Full recognition of Kosovo would end Serbia's dependence on Russia's continued international backing. If no longer constrained by the Kosovo issue, Serbia could accelerate its push for EU accession and deepen cooperation with NATO.” By rejecting the recognition of Kosovo, Russia seeks to weaken the US role in the Balkans, derail and delay NATO's enlargement, and turn the region into a political battlefield to advance its geopolitical and geo-economic interests. For Bechev (2019, 7) “From Moscow's perspective, projecting power in the Balkans is tantamount to giving the West a taste of its own medicine. If the Europeans and the Americans are meddling in its backyard. . . Russia is entitled to do the same in theirs” (See also Grant 2015.) Thus, international recognition is a part of the broader escalating geopolitical rivalry. Kosovo's independence is often blamed for triggering Russia's rivalry with the west, and especially in encouraging the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia in 2008 (see CNN 2008; Milanovic and Wood 2015; Summers 2011). Russia's rejection of Kosovo's independence was also directly linked to their desire to revive Russia's international influence by opposing US foreign policy in the Balkans and wider Europe. According to Bugajski (2008, 3–4), “Kosovo's case for independence enables Russia to elevate its international position, to interpose in Balkan and European affairs, to promote splits within the EU, to gain veto powers over Europe's enlargement, and to construct a Eurasian pole of power as a counterbalance to the United States”. To challenge Russia's near abroad interests, especially in the South Caucasus region, the US and the EU have actively lobbied against the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the pacific region, the US and EU have threatened to cut foreign aid in countries such as Vanuatu and Tuvalu if they do not withdraw the recognition of Georgia's breakaway territories (see Ó Beacháin 2020).

The preceding cases of non-consensual state creation and subsequent recognition by groups of states served as a pretext to justify counter-actions by rival powers. Potentially, this threatens a major fragmentation of the practices of state recognition which followed the end of the Cold War – and which had been apparently stabilised around a basic consensus amongst great powers in favour of collective recognition. It could also lead to an increase in

contested territories with partial recognition, given the number of aspiring states with some level of support from major states. However, this has not (yet) occurred. International society remains fundamentally conservative in terms of the acceptance of new states, and so there has not been a transformation of recognition practices or a dramatic escalation of unilateral recognition by powerful states (see [Table 1](#)). Yet many cases of secession and recognition demonstrate how international recognition can become embroiled in great power rivalries as states rise in relative power and influence and wish to assert their interests and status.

This is also evident in other regions, such as Western Sahara. The major rivalry is between France and the US – which back Morocco’s de facto control of Western Sahara – and Algeria, South Africa and to a certain extent Russia, which are more supportive of the territory’s independence aspirations. France and the US consider Morocco to be a crucial partner in North Africa and the Arab world, and a strategic ally to counter-balance Algeria and other adversaries in the region (Bolton 2007; Darbouche and Zoubir 2008). There are also concerns that support for Western Sahara would unravel new waves of secessionism across Africa in numerous separatist movements (see De Vries, Englebert, and Schomerus 2019; Mundy 2017, 68). Each protagonist tends to use normative and institutional structures to their own advantage (UN Security Council 2019). Morocco’s international allies try to keep the question of Western Sahara on the UN Security Council’s agenda – where they have veto power – whereas South Africa and other regional states are in favour of greater engagement by the African Union. The US and the EU have hidden behind the UN-led process for resolving the Western Sahara self-determination conflict, which in practice enables Morocco to prolong its presence with impunity and advance its economic and geopolitical interests in Western Sahara while neutralising international opposition to the occupation (Noutcheva 2020). Many non-Western states argue that holding a referendum is the only legitimate solution for democratically determining the fate of the Western Sahara, as South Africa argues, “to enable its people to realize their right to self-determination” (UN Security Council 2019, 3).

Other contested territories, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Crimea, have also become politicised in the context of the transitional international order, although these territories are only recognised by Russia and a handful of other pro-Russian states (Allison 2008; Bouris and Papadimitriou 2020; Lynch 2002). Indeed, it has been suggested that Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – and perhaps its de facto annexation of Crimea – would not have happened in the absence of Kosovo’s declaration of independence and its recognition by key Western states (Fabry 2012). Moreover, Russia’s justification for its policies towards these contested territories has made explicit reference to the case of Kosovo and Western states’ support for Kosovo, citing ideas of self-determination and democratic will (B92 2016; Russia Today

2014). Arguably, all of these cases represent a possible increase in the tendency for powerful states to take the lead in recognising contested states where they have special ties, even when consensus has not been reached internationally.

Although the US derecognised Taiwan in 1978 it has used this disputed territory as a space to challenge China's geopolitical interests in Southeast Asia. This has escalated in recent years as China has become positioned as a serious rival to the US. In retaliation, through economic incentives, China has effectively managed to withdraw recognition of Taiwan in Latin America and expand its strategic relations with states hostile to US dominance in the region. When Panama, Dominican Republic, and El Salvador derecognised Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with China, the US considered this move to be a geopolitical threat to its regional interests (White House 2018). In an attempt to limit China's expansive foreign policy, the US has proactively worked to preserve Taiwan's current diplomatic alliances (Visoka forthcoming). Great power rivalry directly affects the chances of recognition-seeking entities for overcoming international contestation.

Coggins (2014, 452) finds that "Great Powers ought to prefer coordinated recognition to maintain their social standing and security; to maintain international stability; and to reproduce the state-centric international order" (See also Ker-Lindsay 2015). However, recent state practice suggests that coordination is more prevalent amongst likeminded powers rather than between competing ones. The US, UK, France and Germany, along with many other European states, coordinated the recognition of Kosovo's independence, for example. Similarly, they jointly devised non-recognition policies on Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and most recently on Crimea (see Maass 2020). The emergence of aspiring states and the demand for recognition provide moments for great powers to (re)assert their status by using their influence in supporting or blocking the entry of nascent states into international society.

The US recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights – discussed earlier – is also symptomatic of the realpolitik approach of great powers to settle territorial and secessionist disputes, and a shift away from international consensus. The White House (2019) proclamation note justified the decision with reference to the strategic importance of this territory for Israel's security and future peace agreement, but the move contravenes the consensual preemptory norm against the acquisition of territory through aggression and the use of force, including the obligation to not recognise such acquisition of territory by UN member states (see UN Security Council 1981). As such it has been condemned by both US allies and rivals (Council of the European Union 2019; Government of Canada 2019). Against the experience of recent history, the US move offers a fresh precedent for recalcitrant states to justify their own territorial expansion practices, be that Russia's violent annexation of Crimea or China's contested South China Sea expansion.

Rivalry and tensions associated with the transitional international order similarly play a role in multilateral debates and decisions about recognition (Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2007). The US has opposed Palestine's bid for admission to the UN, including observer status, and has proactively lobbied against its membership in international agencies, such as UNESCO and INTERPOL. In apparent retaliation, the BRICS withheld support for Kosovo's bid for membership in these two organisations. Robert Gates (2014), former US Secretary of Defence, suggested in his memoirs that disagreements between the United States and Russia on the placement of a missile defence system in Europe played an important role in Russia's decision to block Kosovo's independence at the UN Security Council in 2008. In such cases, it may not be matters of principle at stake, or competing judgements as to the merits of a particular case for international recognition, but rather a tendency for aspiring states to become tied up in great power rivalries or tensions.

## Conclusion

This article has presented a number of observations on the evolving politics of state recognition in a multipolar world order. It has demonstrated that the renewed tensions and rivalries between major powers – sometimes including traditional Western allies – has played a role in protracting contested statehood in a number of key cases, including Kosovo, South Ossetia, Palestine, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Whilst this is, in many ways, a reflection of the historical continuities of great power politics, there is evidence that it reflects the transitional international order of relative power balance changes and the friction this generates. At times, this has threatened a further fragmentation of the fragile norms and rules relating to international recognition, and the possibility of forcible acquisition of territory. It also suggests the prospect of an escalation of unilateral recognition for new, contested, states by great powers.

The politics of international recognition also reflect the historical shifts in power and influence that have occurred in recent decades. In particular, Kosovo demonstrates how the evolving international order has shifted from a US-led unipolar moment to a multipolar distribution of power in which norms and institutions, and the dominance of Western powers, are being challenged by rising states. Kosovo's emergence was in many ways a reflection of Western-led liberal internationalism, and the growing recognition of its statehood until recently seemed to be confirmation of this Western influence. Between 2008 and 2020, 117 states recognised Kosovo; after 2017, 17 states have withdrawn, frozen, or suspended recognition (Visoka [forthcoming](#)). This shift is a proxy for changing influence in a transitional international order.

Simultaneously, some of the diplomatic discourse related to international recognition reflects the normative contestation that can be associated with the transitional international order. Liberal justifications for recognition – with reference to human rights and democracy – are in tension with other principles which emphasise territorial integrity, respect for the sovereignty of existing states, and a strict interpretation of international law. Thus, to some extent, the discourse of international recognition debates does reflect normative contestation; the US and the EU member states are more likely to at least make reference to liberal values in justifying recognition decisions, and key ‘rising’ powers such as China, India and Brazil provide a strict reading of international law around territorial integrity, with far less reference to ‘domestic’ issues.

However, the idea that international recognition is currently being (re) shaped by normative contestation in the context of a transitional international order does not fit with some important empirical patterns. As others (Cooley, Nexon, and Ward 2019) have argued, the changing international order does not reflect a neat contest between status quo vs. revisionist states, and international recognition illustrates this. Russia, an important contender of US and European power, has not itself observed a conservative practice in relation to international recognition, as its support for South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea demonstrate. Divisions between states on state recognition do not run neatly along Western versus non-Western lines. Some Western states – such as Spain, Cyprus, Romania and Greece – are associated with a strict legal approach to international recognition, largely because of sensitivities about separatist political movements in their own countries and a desire to avoid any loosening of the norms governing the creation of new states.

There are also numerous ‘deserving’ cases of entities aspiring to independent statehood according to liberal principles which are apparently ignored by Western states. The disagreement among European powers on the recognition of Kosovo and the growing differences between the US and EU on other cases, such as Palestine and Western Sahara, are signals of a fraying of the liberal international consensus. The case of Palestine further supports this conclusion, where the division between those states which do and do not recognise statehood does not reflect a neat division between Western and non-Western states. The BRICS countries have recognised Palestine, and the US, France and the UK have not, but there are other Western states which do so. To a high degree, therefore, states take decisions on the basis of their own interests, and thus the fragmented, ad hoc and political nature of international recognition continues as it has done in the past. In other words, the fragmentation of liberal international order – always a tenuous concept in reality – is directly linked to the changing domestic attitudes in the US, UK, and many other European countries on their global role and world order. The politics of international recognition reflects a great deal of continuity, including the

fundamental role of power politics and great power interests. There is a general preference for stability which transcends post-Cold War great power rivalries.

In addition, there has arguably not been an upheaval or transformation of international recognition practices. Following Kosovo's independence and recognition by a significant number of states, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea were recognised by Russia, but these latter three cases have received essentially no broader support for their change of status (including from allies of Russia). Except for a limited number of cases, international society remains essentially conservative in nature and reluctant to accept new states. Indeed, many states – whether 'status quo' or 'resurgent' – have separatist or potential separatist challenges, and they generally remain united in opposing a loosening of norms or practices of international recognition. Most of the cases presented in [Table 1](#) have not changed in status in decades, and there are very few cases such as Kosovo where the international community is so clearly divided in terms of recognition. New cases which have made political claims for statehood – such as Catalonia and Iraqi Kurdistan – have found very little support internationally, in line with the conservative nature of international society. Simultaneously, there are some signs of a shift to ultra-realpolitik practices – although not yet a pattern – in international recognition that is shaped by the changing international order. There are cases where very powerful states disregard norms of international recognition in some circumstances, and acquiesce when other powerful states do so as long as it does not threaten their interests, even if this has implications for norms of territorial integrity and collective recognition. But it is unlikely in the foreseeable future that Russia and the US will accommodate one-another's strategic interests in *de facto* states and frozen conflicts and this will weaken any prospects for a rules-based international system – a system which ought to have a universal character but in practice is seen as a euphemism for competing hegemonies (see Porter 2020).

While these controversies and conflicts are features of the existing world order, they are also a by-product of the unregulated nature of state recognition in the international system, namely the absence of normative and institutional mechanisms to govern this practice in world politics. So far, there has not been sufficient interest among states to constitutionalise state recognition in world politics. Clearly defined and widely acceptable norms, rules, and principles for state recognition, administered by established institutions, would provide predictability and consistency, as well as avoid *ad hoc* and arbitrary decisions based on self-interest and untamed power politics. In the ongoing re-balancing of international order, and the geopolitical friction which arises from this, the agreement of such norms would promote peace and stability and serve reciprocal great power interests. Until international recognition is constitutionalised at the global level, the use and abuse of state recognition by powerful states will

continue to occur and to reflect broader geopolitical rivalries, to the cost of those people living in disputed and ambiguous territorial entities.

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