**Independence Movements and Their Aftermath: Evaluating the Likelihood of Success**

Americans, especially in the twenty-first century, tend to underestimate the perils associated with changes in government. The American Revolution was an unlikely triumph. The independence movement simmered for less than a decade before war broke out, and the war lasted less than a decade, too. The yield was a heterogeneous republican polity that had little precedent, but that became a global model in the following centuries. The U.S. Civil War was a bloody, wrenching conflict, but a one-time event. The outcome produced a union with enough local autonomy to prove resilient, even if it encountered pockets of intolerance. The nation that arose from the Civil War grew into a global economic and military powerhouse, and no violent transfer of political power has ever followed.

Hundreds of other independence movements around the world have not fared as well. Conflicts have dragged on for decades, sometimes precipitating massacres and forced migrations. If they ever yielded governments, those governments were often unsteady and subject to constant threats from within and without. Economies lurched from crisis to crisis, police and courts emerged as antagonists in society rather than arbiters, and security remained fleeting. These independence movements do not achieve stability; instead, they contribute to instability, and the population suffers. The worst emerged as failed states, with their hard-fought autonomy under threat from a loose amalgam of fiefdoms and foreign proxies that, collectively, impose some kind of order. It is not a fate many would seek, but it is all too common.

**Considering Independence**

To maximize the potential for a good outcome, populations and leaderships considering independence should explore two things in depth. The first is a fair assessment of what independence is likely to yield. Revolutionaries and secessionists promise they will deliver everything that the population currently enjoys, and more. In practice, merely maintaining current levels of wealth and security is difficult for new governments, even in impoverished and insecure places. With expectations raised by advocates of independence in the pre-independence period, the challenge of meeting public demands can swiftly turn into a political crisis for a new entity and can devolve into scapegoating of political opponents. Things can quickly spiral downward from there.

A clear-eyed assessment of the unalterable aspects of the new state—the size and composition of the population, the geography and geology of the land, water availability, resources, and a host of other factors—is vital. Those characteristics will cast a long shadow over the chances of a new and independent state. While a cadre of activists in any population will be determined to pursue independence, it is important that some portion of the aspiring polity continually evaluate the wisdom of the act, comparing its outcome to various levels of autonomy and levels of independence that do not sever ties of sovereignty.

Even if that results in a conclusion that independence remains desirable, a second task is necessary: understanding the circumstances that make it most likely that independence will produce positive results. Movements rarely can determine the moment that independence is reached, but they can exert strong influence over the context in which it occurs. Allies can be won over, and skeptics reassured. Economies can be developed, domestic institutions can be built, and internal rifts can be healed. If independence comes too swiftly, important elements may not be in place, imperiling the project. With planning, success is not assured, but chances for success can be enhanced significantly.