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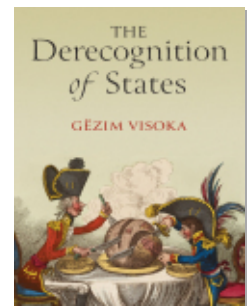
3. The Process of State Derecognition

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3. The Process of State Derecognition

The derecognition of states is rare diplomatic practice. While many states may not get along well and have hostile relationships, they rarely question one another's existence. Even the breakup of diplomatic relations isn't portrayed as derecognition. So if there is a broad consensus that recognition is irreversible, why is derecognition present in contemporary state practice? This chapter examines how state derecognition unfolds in practice by looking at the actors and the process that underpins the severance, downgrading, suspension, and ending of diplomatic relations between states. The chapter approaches derecognition as a multistage and entangled process prone to uneven trajectories and unexpected twists, blockages, and ruptures.

This chapter identifies four significant phases or stages underpinning the state derecognition process. Although the process is complex and it is hard to delineate key stages, conceptualizing it into main phases helps break down its key features, tactics, strategies, outcomes, and broader implications. In other words, some of the stages or phases in the derecognition might be outcomes or extensions of preceding phases, but nonetheless are essential to be accounted for, as they have a formative role in later stages. The first phase of derecognition is contesting the sovereignty of the claimant state. During this phase, the former base state aims to undermine the domestic and international standing of the claimant state to weaken its sovereignty and

capacity to act as a sovereign state at home and abroad. The second phase of the derecognition process consists of persuading third countries to reconsider their position on the claimant state, ranging from signaling the downgrade of its diplomatic relations to taking proactive measures to downgrade relations^{Page 70} → or take a neutral stance on the dispute. The third phase of the process entails instances when the lobbying campaign does not result in full and formal derecognition of the claimant state. However, it can result in freezing recognition, namely retaining recognition but ending diplomatic engagement. The fourth phase is the formal and explicit withdrawal of recognition of the claimant state by third countries. In certain instances, the formal withdrawal of recognition as a significant diplomatic act and the momentum it generates can go unnoticed. However, it can also cause significant diplomatic disputes among contender states. In some instances, regardless of the formal withdrawal of recognition, concerned states continue to have informal diplomatic relations that can last indefinitely or be a transitory phase for restoring diplomatic ties with the claimant state. There is a possibility of re-recognition, too, namely annulment of the derecognition decision and restoration of the original decision for recognition.

This chapter's discussion of each stage of state derecognition draws on a comparative examination of contemporary cases where new varieties and patterns of derecognition are analyzed by dissecting similarities and differences among the case studies. Yet tracing the derecognition of state is a complex process. Some claimant countries under examination in this book, such as Taiwan and Western Sahara, have been recognized, derecognized, and then re-recognized several times. Thus, the analysis of the process of

derecognition focuses on the examples and cases that help inductively illustrate the politics and practices, as well as the pathways and variants, of derecognition in contemporary world politics. That said, each case has its unique trajectory and claims to self-determination and statehood, and has had different recognition and derecognition events. The key is to establish a balance between context-specific and contingent generalization when analyzing and exploring each stage and variant of derecognition.

The chapter is organized as follows. It first examines the domestic and international contestation of claimant states that foregrounds all cases of derecognition. The second section looks at the dynamics of shifting from contestation to reconsideration of recognition by third countries, namely looking at the features of anti-diplomatic campaigns that are characteristic across all cases. The third section looks at the intermediary and ambivalent actions that third countries take in neither fully withdrawing recognition nor fully endorsing the sovereignty and statehood of the claimant state. Next, the chapter looks at the formal and full withdrawal of recognition and its aftermath, especially how all protagonist states react and cope with such a decision and what actions are taken to sustain or reverse the new diplomatic reality.

Contesting the Independence of the Claimant State

The first stage in the derecognition process is contesting the independence and sovereignty of the claimant state. Former base states that contest a claimant state usually target two categories of third states. The first category is countries that have not yet recognized the claimant state. The focus of

diplomatic efforts is to persuade these states not to change their position on the claimant state. The aim is to retain the position of nonrecognition. This phase is a response to the recognition quest of the claimant state, aiming to prevent and limit its success in consolidating international legal sovereignty through diplomatic recognition and membership in international organizations. Second, contesting the sovereignty of the claimant state aims to change the position of countries that have already recognized the claimant state or have established extensive institutional cooperation short of formal diplomatic relations. Thus, the process of derecognition often goes hand in hand with the process of preventing further recognition of claimant states. At its core, it aims to delegitimize the claimant state and ensure that its statehood remains contested and gradually unravels (Huddleston 2020).

First and foremost, state contestation starts by contesting the historical, legal, and factual grounds for statehood and attacking the claimant state's pro-independence leadership. Domestically, the former base state seeks to undermine the empirical sovereignty of the claimant state by creating political, legal, economic, and security blockages that hinder the normal functioning of the society (Ker-Lindsay 2012; Ojeda-Garcia et al. 2017). It can also involve maintaining administrative and military presence in certain parts of the contested territory, pressuring domestic changes by discriminating against the secessionist community, and favoring the ethnic and political communities loyal to the base state. Internationally, the former base state uses its diplomatic network, status within multilateral organizations, and strategic alliances with influential states to prevent the claimant state from gaining diplomatic recognition, participating in or joining regional and international bodies, and from strengthening its

relations with other states (Weill 2020). Although contesting statehood and preventing recognition is about creating the conditions for a particular outcome, sometimes it is simply a part of a general strategy of the former base state to buy time in the hope that new and better options will become available for imposing a settlement (such as partition on ethnic lines) or reincorporating the territory through the use of force. In some instances, this may be because there is no clear consensus on the type of settlement people want. At other times, Page 72 →it may be that the solution on offer is generally unacceptable, and there is hope that the passage of time may create the conditions for a more favorable settlement (Ker-Lindsay 2012: 74).

Ultimately, contesting the sovereignty of the claimant state by the former base state serves as a political weapon used to maintain enmity, politically and economically isolate and deviate the claimant state, diminish its prestige, lower its morale, and, most destructively, incite domestic and international instability (Berridge 1994: 6; Berg and Pegg 2020).

These domestic and international contestation features of the claimant states are prevalent in all case studies examined in this book. For example, mainland China claims Taiwan as part of its territory and wants the island to unite with the mainland, from which it split during the civil war in 1949. China uses the “One China Principle” as the core argument against the recognition of Taiwan, and respectively, as a normative basis for its derecognition. The One China Principle states that there is one China, but two political systems, and the sole representative abroad is Beijing. From the perspective of mainland China, Taiwan (or the Republic of China) ceased to exist in 1949, and the sole successor state is the People’s Republic of China (MFA of PRC 2019). China uses UN General Assembly Resolution 2758

(1971) to support the claim that Taiwan is part of its territory and that there is one China regardless of the de facto lack of control over the island of Taiwan. Resolution 2758 considers the People's Republic of China to be "the only lawful representatives of China to the United Nations," and notes that Taiwan's representatives must be expelled from the positions they "unlawfully occupy at the United Nations and in all organizations related to it."

China perceives "the secessionist activities of the 'Taiwan Independence' forces [as] the biggest immediate threat to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as peace and stability on both sides of the Taiwan Straits and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Australia 2005: 18). For example, China's 2005 Anti-Secession Law states that if Taiwan formally declares independence, China will not rule out employing "non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Ji 2006: 240). While cross-strait relations have remained relatively peaceful for a long time, in 2021 the situation deteriorated to the point that mainland China has increased its military provocations and warned of potential takeover of the island of Taiwan. For instance, in October 2021, "Chinese air force sent around 150 jets into Taiwan's air-defence identification zone" (Financial Times 2021). Around the same time, Chinese president Xi Jinping warned that "the historicalPage 73 → task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled, and will definitely be fulfilled." While China has pledged that reunification with Taiwan will take place in a peaceful manner and in line with the principle of one country and two systems, Taiwan has objected to such an arrangement, fearing that China would strip

the island of its democratic and autonomous institutions and employ restrictive and authoritarian measures similar to those applied in Hong Kong (BBC 2021). On the domestic front, to retain Taiwan's contestation and partial isolation, China could deploy hybrid warfare relying on naval blockades, covert attacks against Taiwan's critical infrastructure, disinformation warfare, and political campaigns for undermining democratic institutions in Taipei (Easton 2022).

On the other hand, even as Taiwan considers itself a separate and independent state, it has never declared independence. While Taiwan enjoys economic and political stability domestically, it has relied on diplomatic allies and external bilateral recognition to maintain claims to separate and state-like subjectivity internationally. For Taiwan, the function of diplomatic recognition is to maintain a sense of sovereign statehood, expand international sovereignty, and use allies to represent its interests at international bodies that it cannot access. As Stringer (2006: 551) argues: "Diplomatic recognition provides the Taiwanese government with some legitimacy in pressing its claims in the international community, and some proof that it is a sovereign entity." The existing states that recognize Taiwan are small and weak states in the international plane, but, nonetheless, they formally enjoy sovereign equality and are subjects under international law (Chiang and Hwang 2008: 72). Hence, Taiwan is well aware of the significance of diplomatic allies for retaining at least symbolic claims to independent statehood. Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, admitted in 2021 that "Taiwan's exclusion from the United Nations and most other international institutions could have led to isolation, but Taiwan instead tapped into the tremendous creativity and capacity of its people, allowing us

to establish global connections by other means—through small businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and various semi-official groupings” (Ingwen 2021).

However, since mainland communist China was allowed to claim a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, Taiwan has gradually lost its diplomatic allies. The change in UN representation constituted a dramatic tipping point in the diplomatic competition between Taiwan and China since it was followed by a collapse of the ROC’s formal diplomatic ties with other countries. In 1970, Taipei led Beijing in diplomatic recognition by a margin of 68 to 53. Just three years later, the PRC had a more than two-to-onePage 74 → advantage of 86 to 39; and by 1977 this had become an overwhelming margin of 111 to 23 (Clark 2008: 87). Over the years, Chinese diplomats have argued that countries that recognize Taiwan not only breach the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China but also undermine cross-strait relations and political dialogue. And to a large extent, China has succeeded in keeping the territorial claim over Taiwan alive and central to its foreign policy of switching diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. As of January 2024, only twelve countries had official ties with Taiwan—seven in Central America and the Caribbean, one in Africa, three small island states in the Pacific, and the Vatican. As this book went to press, Nauru withdrew the recognition of Taiwan in January 2024, which took place days after Taiwan elected the pro-independence president Lai Ching-te (Government of the Republic of Nauru 2024). Clark (2008: 87) shows, “The loss of the ROC’s seat in the United Nations was devastating in terms of its international status because Beijing used the reversal of UN membership to solidify its claim to sovereignty over all of China, including Taiwan.”

Consequently, over the years, China has contested the statehood claims of Taiwan by blocking its membership in international organizations and undermining its ability to participate in international forums. Most important and relevant for this study, China considers its campaign for the derecognition of Taiwan as crucial foreign policy instrument to keep alive its territorial claim over the island. China has forced several multinational corporations to erase any trace of digital or symbolic recognition of Taiwan's separate economic and trade subjectivity. Most recently, China has shifted its discourse and threatened the United States, EU, and Australia for encouraging Taiwan's independence and taking measures to undermine "China's sovereignty, territorial integrity and other core interests." Such actions, it warned, would force it to take measures "to defend . . . national sovereignty and territorial integrity" (MFA of PRC 2021). So the dynamics of mutual contestation are significant in the case of mainland China and Taiwan to the point that there is a risk of conflict escalation and breach of the status quo (Heath, Lilly, and Han 2023).

The dynamics of contestation as the first stage of state derecognition play out differently in Africa, as the dispute between Morocco and Western Sahara shows. Although Western Sahara has not formally undergone the decolonization process, Morocco, as the occupying power, continues to make claims over the territory and challenge the legitimacy of the Sahrawi Arabic Democratic Republic (SADR). The Polisario Front represents the SADR, the governance structures and population primarily based in exile
Page 75 → or camps in Algeria (Wilson 2016). The main dispute over Western Sahara is the delayed referendum on self-determination. The UN has deployed a mission there but has been unsuccessful in completing the

decolonization process. There is a dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front on the electorate deemed eligible to vote in a self-determination referendum (Zunes and Mundy 2010). While Morocco seeks to expand the vote to all Saharan tribes linked to the colonial-period Spanish Sahara, the Polisario Front insists on limiting the count to those who were in the Spanish census of 1974 (Jensen 2005: 13). Over time, Morocco has expanded its settlements in the Western Sahara and has actively exploited natural and sea resources in a way deemed problematic under international law of occupation (Riegl and Doboš 2017a: 101). On the domestic front, Morocco has pursued a policy of isolation toward the Polisario Front and one of hardship for its supporters while simultaneously incentivizing defections among the Saharawi people to weaken the internal legitimacy and unity of the SADR authorities in refugee camps and exile.

As Morocco's occupation has expanded since the 1970s, the Moroccan authorities have prevented the Sahrawi people, represented by the Polisario Front, from consolidating state capacities and forcing them to operate in exile. It has maintained control in significant parts of Western Sahara's territory. Central to Morocco's policy on Western Sahara is the nonrecognition or derecognition of the SADR and the expansion of international acceptance to Morocco's control over the territory (Besenyő, Huddleston, and Zoubir 2023). Morocco has simultaneously taken a wide range of diplomatic steps as part of its efforts to undermine the SADR's international standing. The most important is the 2007 autonomy plan, which secured UN attention and allowed readmission to the African Union in 2017. Through these multilateral and regional platforms, Morocco seeks

to strengthen its bilateral diplomatic efforts centered around economic and military cooperation with countries that have not recognized or have derecognized the SADR (Fakir 2017).

Moreover, Morocco has tried to solidify its claim over Western Sahara by encouraging other states to open consular offices in the occupied territories or by organizing international events, such as the Crans Montana Forum in the city of Dakhla (Morocco World News 2015). Such strategies, similar to Israeli's attempt to make Jerusalem its diplomatic capital, aim to secure wider international recognition of Morocco's territorial claims over Western Sahara. For example, African countries such as Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Gambia, Liberia, the Union of Comoros, Cape Verde, and Togo, among Page 76 →others, have also opened their honorary consulates in Laâyoune and Dakhla and have openly portrayed such gestures as recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara (Morocco World News 2020). Of significance importance has been the United States' recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory in December 2020 and its pledge to open a consulate in the Western Sahara (White House 2020a). This proclamation, which US president Donald Trump signed, not only recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the territory but stated that "an independent Sahrawi State is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution" (White House 2020b). By doing so, the United States took a stance on this self-determination conflict whereby it rejected recognizing SADR as an independent state and expressed its preference for the outcome of the eventual referendum. Thus, these are examples of direct measures to contest

the symbolic sovereignty of SADR over certain parts of Western Sahara, and they show how third countries are implicated in legitimizing Morocco's control over the contested territory.

Internationally, the struggle to claim control and sovereignty over Western Sahara occurs through the battle for recognition and derecognition. In the absence of control over the Western Sahara territory and de facto government on the ground, the Polisario Front, as founders of the SADR, has tried to retain the claims to independent statehood through bilateral recognition as well as participation and membership in regional bodies, such as the African Union. As of 2023, SADR was recognized by around 31 out of 193 UN member states. However, Morocco's decade-long campaign for international contestation of SADR has resulted in withdrawing or freezing recognition by 53 states. These figures fluctuate as several third countries have recognized, derecognized, and re-recognized SADR several times, as will be discussed later in the chapter. Thus, Morocco's main focus internationally has been to delegitimize the Polisario Front and persuade third countries to join its political strategy of denying the existence of any Sahrawi independent state in Western Sahara. Both sides have exploited the UN and international courts in this struggle to seek legal confirmation of their right to rule over the Western Sahara. As early as 1975, the International Court of Justice, through an advisory opinion, rejected Morocco's claim over the territory and reconfirmed the right of Sahrawi people to self-determination (Wooldridge 1979). Equally, the European Court of Justice contested a trade agreement the European Commission signed with Morocco to access fish and other resources from occupied

territories. So, internationally, SADR has Page 77 → maintained a moral and legal upper hand, but when it comes to exercising sovereign statehood on the ground, it has been unable to do so.

Most important, Morocco's campaign for derecognition has been chiefly based on economic deals, and geopolitical and security pacts have significantly narrowed SADR's international space. Within the UN system, Morocco has enjoyed broad support from Western states represented at the UN Security Council for its autonomy plan and for curtailing the ability of the UN Mission for Referendum in Western Sahara to accomplish its mandate on the ground. So Morocco has successfully contested SADR's sovereignty at home and abroad, thus enhancing its chances for significant control over the Western Sahara (Besenyő, Huddleston, and Zoubir 2023).

In Europe, Serbia contests Kosovo's independence because it was declared without its consent and in breach of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, Kosovo has shown steady progress in the completion of international recognition since it declared independence in 2008 (Newman and Visoka 2018a). Over one hundred UN member states have recognized it. But, contesting Kosovo's statehood remains one of Serbia's most critical foreign policy goals. Serbia claims that it defends international law, the UN Charter, and the Security Council's supreme authority to preserve international peace by defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity. To solidify its territorial claims over Kosovo and justify its continued interference in Kosovo's domestic affairs, Serbia decided to change its constitution and incorporate Kosovo into its preambular clauses while in the middle of UN-led talks in 2006 on the territory's future status (Weller

2009). Serbia created parallel structures during the UN's transitional administration to protect the remaining Serb population in Kosovo, to prevent claims to independence, and, if necessary, to prepare grounds for the internal partition of Kosovo. These structures consist of a chain of entities within sectors such as security, education, health, and public services, which the Serbian government maintains politically and financially (Visoka 2016). Although formally, these parallel structures were dismantled after 2011 as part of the EU-led talks for the normalization of relations, in practice, they continued to operate over a decade later as informal structures under the political tutelage and financial support of the Serbian government (Balkan Insight 2021).

In the immediate aftermath of Kosovo's independence in 2008, Serbia tried to contest it by seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the accordence of Kosovo's independence with international law. Serbia argued that Kosovo's declaration of independence was unilateral, illegal, without the host state's consent, and against internationalPage 78 → law and the international system of states based on inalienability of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Despite the ICJ's advisory opinion in favor of Kosovo—stating that the declaration of independence did not contradict international law—Serbia continued to argue that Kosovo's independence breached international norms and laws on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and statehood (Ker-Lindsay 2012; Visoka 2018). Disregarding this crucial judicious ruling, Serbia claimed that Kosovo remains under international administration and that the ICJ “did not affirm the right of the province of Kosovo to secession from the Republic of Serbia” (UN Secretary-General 2010: 2).

Since 2008, Serbia has actively worked to prevent recognition of Kosovo, but with little success. Since the declaration of independence, 117 sovereign states have recognized Kosovo, and the country has established diplomatic relations with over 80 states, has opened around forty diplomatic missions, and has joined over fifty regional and international organizations (Visoka 2018; 2019). Central to Serbia's diplomatic warfare against Kosovo has been the prevention and reversal of Kosovo's recognition. Serbia considers recognition of Kosovo a threat to its national interests as well as a source of internal and regional instability (Ministry of Defence of Serbia 2017: 7). In 2017, Serbia launched a campaign to undermine Kosovo's international standing by offering economic and military assistance to freeze or withdraw the recognition of Kosovo. Between 2008 and 2014, when Kosovo received over one hundred recognitions, Serbia's diplomatic campaign was mainly focused on preventing the recognition of Kosovo and obstructing its membership in international organizations, such as the UN, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Council of Europe (Newman and Visoka 2018b). The campaign was possible mainly due to powerful support from Russia and other major regional powers in wider Europe.

Over time, Serbia realized that by getting recognition from over one hundred states, Kosovo had secured two-thirds of the votes needed to join UN specialized agencies and other regional organizations. As noted by Serbian foreign minister Ivica Dačić: "In 2015 we had an attempt to get Kosovo into UNESCO and then we faced the difficult task of preventing this, given that at that moment, in 2014, 113 countries had recognized Kosovo." Thus, by pursuing the derecognition of Kosovo, Serbia is seeking to block Kosovo's international access, namely, reduce the number of states that interact with

or vote for Kosovo in multilateral bodies. Most international and regional organizations require two-thirds of votes or qualified majorities, which Page 79 → means Serbia would have a much broader support base to block Kosovo's participation and membership in those international bodies. The calculation of this campaign is straightforward: the more states withdraw the recognition of Kosovo, the smaller the chance of Kosovo joining international organizations. Therefore, Serbia's goal became to reduce the number of countries that have recognized Kosovo to under one hundred so that Kosovo would not have sufficient votes to join any major international or regional organization.

Moreover, by blocking Kosovo's advancement in the international arena, Serbia has exploited the international contestation of Kosovo to enhance its bargaining power in the EU-led dialogue for normalization of relations with Kosovo. In this context, derecognition has served as an instrument of sabotage and diplomatic duress to force Kosovo to make concessions in favor of Serbia (Novosti 2019a). Finally, Serbia's pursuit of the derecognition of Kosovo is seen both as a victory and as a restoration of its international influence after decades of humiliation and defeat and as a strategic move against Kosovo's international partners, demonstrating Serbia's ability to reverse Kosovo's international standing (B92 2018d).

Finally, in the South Caucasus, since Abkhazia and South Ossetia proclaimed their independent statehood in the early 1990s and were finally recognized by the Russian Federation in 2008, the main foreign policy goal of Georgia as the former base state has been contestation and international isolation of these breakaway territories. Both territories proclaimed

independence after a short war involving Russia as their main ally. Since there is a de facto border between Georgia and these breakaway territories and the stakes are high for military confrontation due to Russia's military presence and the EU's monitoring mission, Georgia contests the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia mainly through legal, political, and administrative measures (de Waal and von Twickel 2020). Over the years, Georgia has condemned all traces of independent statehood for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2008 the government of Georgia even approved a special law on occupied territories to "define the status of the territories occupied as a result of the military aggression by the Russian Federation and to establish a special legal regime in the above territories." In the international sphere, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have not managed to receive broad international recognition—primarily due to Western condemnation of Russia's intervention and the collective nonrecognition policy of the EU. As of 2024, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been recognized by the Russian FederationPage 80 → and nine other countries closely allied with Russia. The United States, the EU, and the majority of UN member states remain committed to the territorial integrity of Georgia, advocate for the peaceful resolution of disputes, and support gradually reincorporating these breakaway regions into Georgia. Under these circumstances, Georgian diplomacy exerts pressure on third countries to thwart any public rallies by representatives of Abkhazia, whatever their focus may be—cultural, humanitarian, educational, musical, or other. The Georgian Foreign Ministry actively seeks out those planning to decide on the recognition of Abkhazia to apply diplomatic pressures (Ó Beacháin 2020).

Therefore, the domestic and international contestation of the claimant state foregrounds all anti-diplomatic actions of the former base states and represents the first significant hallmark in the derecognition process. The contestation of the independence and sovereignty of the claimant state—through nonrecognition and persuasion of third countries not to extend recognition—is the baseline and foundational feature of all state derecognition campaigns. Across all cases, it is clear that domestic and international contestation of the claimant states by the former base state and its allies is a crucial method for not only symbolically undermining the sovereignty and state consolidation of the claimant state but also for subversively continuing war by other means in the international arena by preventing recognition and eventually reversing international recognition of the claimant state. In other words, without the active contestation by the former base state, the third countries are more likely to continue recognizing the effective authority of the claimant state and accept it into the club of sovereign states. While contestation of statehood is ever present in policy discourse and state practice, it does not often lead to the derecognition of the claimant state. It is a necessary condition but insufficient in influencing third countries' decisions to withdraw recognition of the claimant state. Claimant states often launch their counter-campaigns to try to retain their diplomatic allies and prevent the prospects for derecognition. Thus, the other side of state contestation is the capacity and creativity of the claimant state to survive and adapt to the international system. It can be noted that, across all the cases examined here, the stronger the efforts of former base states to contest the statehood of claimant states, the more resilient the latter appear

in defending themselves and building alternative alliances. Such dynamics of contestation are a significant source of instability and block normalization of relations and peaceful coexistence between contender states.

Reconsidering Recognition of the Claimant State

The second strategic step in the state derecognition process involves identifying third countries that have already recognized the claimant state but, for various reasons, would be open to reconsidering their position. Frequently, such reconsideration is a direct product of diplomatic lobbying by the former base state and its international allies during the state contestation phase. However, it can also be driven by other factors, such as the extortionist foreign policy of third countries that reach out to contested states and offer to trade or rent recognition for individual or state profit. Such a step in the derecognition process can be triggered by other international entanglements, such as rivalry among global and regional powers that use contested states as proxies to advance their own interests. As this section shows, lobbying for reconsidering, suspending, and freezing the recognition of the claimant state can take place in two forms: directly by the former base state that utilizes economic, political, and diplomatic means, and indirectly by its diplomatic allies, who exert their geopolitical and economic influence.

While the struggle between the claimant and former base state over recognition tends to reach out to all other sovereign states (UN members), only a limited number of states tend to be open to reconsidering their recognition of the claimant state and engaging in the derecognition saga. It is unusual and uncommon for established and powerful states to engage in the

derecognition of other states. In fact, both democratic and undemocratic states with long-standing diplomatic traditions are wary of this anti-diplomatic practice. They either withhold the recognition first or proactively promote nonrecognition of a specific claimant state. For an overwhelming number of sovereign states, once recognition is granted, it is tough to withdraw. This is partially a result of the sustainability of foreign policy and the desire to project political and normative consistency as much as circumstances permit. There is also peer pressure among like-minded countries to hold on to the previous synchronous, joint, or collective decision for recognition.

However, evidence shows that derecognizing other states has emerged as a common practice among a small group of states—primarily located in the global south—that gained independent statehood as part of the decolonization process—who continue to struggle with chronic poverty and geopolitical vulnerabilities or are ruled by semi-authoritarian regimes. In particular, several African, Latin American, and Caribbean nations with weak economies and (semi)authoritarian regimes are keen to exploit their status as Page 82 →sovereign states and UN members and engage in trading their right to recognition and diplomatic allegiances in exchange for economic, political, and military favors. Among the most prominent of those involved in withdrawing, renting, or switching their recognition of other states are Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, the Dominican Republic, Gambia, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Nauru, Panama, the Solomon Islands, Suriname, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu (see the appendix). Notably, postcolonial states have a long-standing tradition of taking advantage of great power politics and rivalry to obtain concessions and favors in exchange

for their political allegiance and security cooperation (Taylor 2002). As Stringer (2006: 548) notes, for small states, “Diplomacy is often their only effective instrument of statecraft for making an impact within the international system on issues critical to their national interests.” So they are well positioned “to leverage the prerogatives of their sovereignty, specifically their ability to confer recognition on another state, in exchange for economic aid and private investment” (Stringer 2006: 564). For these postcolonial extortionist states, state derecognition is one of the only available foreign policy assets they can use to reduce their vulnerability, benefit from foreign aid, renew alliances, and influence the international system more generally.

In general, persuading other states to reconsider recognizing the claimant state requires extensive diplomatic investment by the former base state and its international allies. As the consideration for derecognition is often grounded on incentives of some sort, third states engage in bargaining games with both parties to maximize their gains. While such diplomatic bargaining is not very different from other bilateral diplomatic transactions, its impact on the claimant state is much more significant than normal diplomatic transactions. The campaign for state derecognition involves personal diplomacy, which requires knowing with whom to interact and lobby, which amounts to knowing where the power lies. In some places, presidents are more powerful than prime ministers, whereas in other cases, lobbying through the foreign minister or other designated ministers or advisers to the government can deliver better results.

Most important, knowing how to relate the campaign for derecognition to the historical, cultural, and economic features of the interlocutor is essential to acquiring the desired outcome. The diplomatic efforts to prevent or push for derecognition at this stage often entail providing economic and development assistance, deepening bilateral military and security cooperation, and defending mutual interests within multilateral organizations. Economic diplomacy, so-called checkbook and dollar diplomacy, has been Page 83 →at the heart of Taiwan's and China's struggle for international recognition. Notably, the checkbook diplomacy of Taiwan and China is partially determined by their status as strong economies that can afford to use economic levers to advance their interests and partially by the self-perpetuating culture of checkbook diplomacy, whereby derecognizing states themselves condition the retention or withdrawal of recognition in exchange of financial and economic goods. Checkbook diplomacy is not very common in other cases, such as Serbia and Kosovo, Morocco and Western Sahara, and Abkhazia–South Ossetia and Georgia. They tend to use other diplomatic and military means to encourage third countries to consider the derecognition of the claimant state.

As part of diplomatic efforts for or against derecognition, visit diplomacy and other diplomatic incentives are often at play. Since the third countries implicated in the derecognition saga are often ignored and marginalized, they benefit from visit and hospitality diplomacy by the contender states because such events boost national pride and increase international attention (Yang 2011). Visit diplomacy involves large delegations from third countries who receive luxury treatment, financial payments, and treatment as world leaders (Brady and Henderson 2010: 212). The payoffs of visit diplomacy

can range from establishing and maintaining personal relationships to negotiating deals for retaining, reconsidering, or shifting diplomatic recognition. In this context, visit diplomacy by the claimant state often indicates that bilateral relations are threatened and that additional financial incentives must be injected to prevent derecognition. For example, in 2006 Taiwan's president and foreign minister visited Chad to prevent derecognition, but they could not stop it. In another case, the Taiwanese government invited the leadership of the Solomon Islands to visit Taiwan as part of its efforts to prevent derecognition. Before losing Burkina Faso, Gambia, Malawi, and São Tomé and Príncipe as diplomatic allies, Taiwan tried to strengthen personal relationships with their leaders by organizing joint events such as the Africa-Taiwan Summit and injecting further socioeconomic assistance. However, there are instances when visit diplomacy results in defusing or delaying derecognition. For example, in 2019, the Taiwanese president visited Palau, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands to cultivate diplomatic ties with them. Similarly, increased diplomatic interaction between specific third countries and former base states could indicate their attempt to lobby for derecognition. However, such a process is often channeled through secret diplomacy and out of public eyes to avoid potential backlash and international condemnation.

Page 84 →The derecognition saga forces both the former base state and the claimant state to expand their diplomatic networks and open embassies in countries and regions that otherwise would not be considered strategic from the perspective of economic and social ties. In exchange for the derecognition of Taiwan, China tends to open embassies and deepen economic ties. China now has the most significant diplomatic network in the

world, surpassing that of the United States and other global powers. Taiwan also has opened embassies in countries that recognized its sovereign statehood even if no Taiwanese citizen or businessperson resided in those countries (such as Nauru before 2024). As part of its efforts to derecognize Kosovo, Serbia added seven new embassies and consulates to its existing network of sixty-nine embassies and twenty-four consulates. The new embassies were in locations where Serbia had promised to open them as part of a deal to withdraw the recognition of Kosovo. Serbia's foreign minister admitted that "in selecting the location of new diplomatic missions, we took into account one of the most important foreign policy goals of Serbia—preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state and strengthening our position on the unilaterally proclaimed independence of Kosovo" (Novosti 2019b). In an attempt to mitigate unwanted effects, in 2018, Kosovo's Ministry of Foreign Affairs proactively worked to expand diplomatic relations and accredited its diplomats as nonresident ambassadors in different parts of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In February 2018, Kosovo established diplomatic relations with Bangladesh and Oman (MFA of Kosovo 2018b, 2018c). The embassy in Panama, serving as Kosovo's hub in Latin America, has gained diplomatic accreditation and representation in four other countries in this region: Barbados, Belize, Costa Rica, and Saint Kitts and Nevis. Similarly, to prevent the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia rushed to establish diplomatic relations with all UN member states and expand its diplomatic network in all parts of the world.

A change of government in many countries can signal a change in foreign policy orientation, especially as the contenders have different ideological and personal motivations. Electoral processes and changes of government open up the opportunity for the former base states to approach third countries to reconsider their recognition of claimant states. Contender countries try to work with different political parties, hoping that once in power, the party will formulate a foreign policy in their interest. The approach of both China and Taiwan is to influence targeted states even without diplomatic ties through trade relations and other informal assistance to opposition parties, media, and interest groups. For example, China worked with several Page 85 → Latin American nations for many years before they derecognized Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with China. Thus, elections are essential to measure how the long-term investment pays off. For example, Taiwan's deputy minister rushed to visit Tuvalu, one of its few remaining allies in the Pacific region, following the 2019 elections in the small island nation, fearing that a change of government could impact their diplomatic relations (Taiwan News 2019a). In preventing derecognition, Taiwan even granted airplanes and helicopters to Latin American presidents and statemen for personal use (Atkinson 2014: 426). In another context, Morocco utilized the rise of post-left governments in Latin America to persuade them to revise their decision on recognizing SADR (Masiky 2017). Within weeks of government change in El Salvador, the country decided to withdraw the recognition of SADR (Morocco World News 2019a, 2019b). In another case, when the pro-SADR president of Bolivia was forced to step down in 2019, the new interim government in power suspended the recognition of SADR. It adopted "constructive neutrality" until "a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution is reached . . . in

accordance with the principles and objectives set out in the Charter of the United Nations” (Government of Bolivia 2020). Thus, electoral cycles offer opportunities to third countries and the contender states to exploit domestic openings to retain or reconsider the recognition of the claimant state. However, they also prove how unstable is the institution of diplomatic recognition, which requires constant incentives to maintain relations with third countries and exposes how indecent and damaging such extortionist diplomatic relations are.

In addition to checkbook diplomacy, former base states use personality politics, history, and symbolic relations to leverage third countries into reconsidering their recognition of the claimant state. For example, Serbia has used the diplomatic legacy and heritage of Tito’s Yugoslavia as a leader of the nonalignment movement during the Cold War to persuade countries in the global south to reconsider their position on Kosovo. Yugoslavia played an essential role in decolonization and supported new postcolonial states in their early quest for national development. While Serbian nationalism has been one of the key reasons for the dissolution of Yugoslavia and for diminishing its heritage and legacy, this has not stopped the Serbian government or third countries in the global south from considering Serbia the successor of Yugoslavia and inherent its international heritage. During the campaign for the derecognition of Kosovo, Serbian foreign minister Dačić argued that “Africa is very important for us. There are fifty-four members of the United Nations from Africa. Also, these are our traditionally friendly countries from Page 86 →the time of Tito and Yugoslavia where no one has been for ten, twenty, and in some thirty years” (RTS 2019b). Dačić added: “Most of them have never been to our region, and the only thing they

know about our region is probably Tito and Yugoslavia.” As will be shown later in this chapter, several African countries, such as Ghana and Comoros, have acknowledged Yugoslavia’s legacy as part of their consideration of the derecognition of Kosovo’s independence. It takes more than such symbolic leverage to persuade other states to withdraw the recognition of claimant states. Nonetheless, it provides an important entry point for negotiating the terms of derecognition.

Concerning European states, Serbia has deployed a different strategy for the derecognition of Kosovo. It has exploited chiefly the diaspora community and local interest groups to lobby from the bottom up. So far, Kosovo has been recognized by twenty-two out of twenty-seven EU member states. Five countries, namely Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, continue to withhold the recognition of Kosovo pending a settlement with Serbia. In addition to ensuring these five EU member states do not recognize Kosovo, Serbia reached out to other European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovenia, France, Italy, and neighboring Montenegro, to try to initiate a domestic debate to rethink their positions on Kosovo and eventually either suspend or withdraw recognition. In the Czech Republic, Serbia initially worked with opposition parties and interest groups sympathetic to Serbia. Since 2001, groups such as Civil Society Friends of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija have regularly pressed the Czech government to consider withdrawal of Kosovo’s recognition by labeling the declaration of independence in 2008 and NATO’s intervention in 1999 as a violation of international law (Civil Society Friends of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija 2018). The campaign for the derecognition of Kosovo became serious in September 2019 when Milos Zeman, the Czech Republic’s president,

publicly stated that “if more countries withdraw that recognition, the Czech Republic could be among them.” He added, “We support the Western Balkans region’s gradual approaching to the EU, but I always say—without Kosovo” (N1 2019e). In France, Serbia lobbied for the derecognition of Kosovo through a petition initiated by Serb-French groups. The petition intended to pressure the French National Assembly to withdraw recognition of Kosovo and push for autonomy status as a region of Serbia (B92 2019). A similar petition was organized in Italy on the anniversary of Kosovo’s independence, where Italian and Serbian lobby groups requested the government review its decision to recognize Kosovo (Telegraf 2019). In supporting these petitions, pro-SerbianPage 87 → groups have invoked the derecognition of Kosovo by more than ten countries as a precedent that European states should follow. While these petitions did not have an immediate impact, their aim was to shape public opinion and prepare the grounds for contesting European support for Kosovo both from the bottom up and through bilateral diplomatic pressure.

While the process of state derecognition is predominantly a matter of diplomatic agency—namely the deployment of material resources, security arrangements, and diplomatic networks—evidence shows that the support of other states, especially that of regional and global powers, can play a significant role in shifting the balance of forces among the contenders. As part of the diplomatic efforts to pursue or prevent derecognition, the former base state and the claimant state tend to mobilize their diplomatic allies, especially the great powers, whenever possible. For example, Serbia pursued its derecognition campaign by itself, though it benefited from Russia and other non-Western states. Although Serbia denied Russia’s support for its

derecognition of Kosovo campaign, Russia's connection became obvious (N1 2019b, 2009d). Russia signed bilateral agreements with Suriname, Burundi, the Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, and Madagascar only days after they decided to withdraw their recognition of Kosovo (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019). Russia abolished visa requirements with some of these countries, while it signed military cooperation agreements with others. Russia played a direct role in persuading Suriname to derecognize Kosovo in 2018. Suriname announced the decision to revoke Kosovo's independence while Suriname's foreign minister was visiting Russia, demonstrating Russia's support for Serbia's campaign for the derecognition of Kosovo (MFA of Russia 2017).

Meanwhile, the United States tries to indirectly support Taiwan internationally by discouraging existing allies from switching allegiance to Beijing and warning them of the potential consequences of such action. For instance, a group of US congressmen proposed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act to "strengthen Taiwan's standing around the world." The proposal, said the group, was "in response to several nations breaking official diplomatic ties with Taiwan due to Chinese pressure and bullying tactics" (Sunshine State News 2018). US senator Ed Markey declared in 2018 that "without a coherent U.S. strategy to push back, Taiwan's official partners might drop from 17 to zero. We must stand up for our friends in Taiwan" (Sunshine State News 2018). Most importantly, the locus of this initiative was, as the act says, "to downgrade U.S. relations with any government that takes

adverse actions about Taiwan, Page 88 →and to suspend or alter U.S. foreign assistance, including foreign military financing, to governments that take adverse actions with regard to Taiwan” (Sunshine State News 2018).

Backed by Russia, Abkhazia was close to securing recognition from the Dominican Republic, but the development never materialized once the United States summoned President Fernández for an urgent meeting in New York (Ó Beacháin 2020: 435). Prior to the visit of Serbian MFA to Grenada to lobby for the derecognition of Kosovo, the US Department of State sent a demarche to the government of Grenada to prevent such a move. In this demarche, which was leaked to Serbian diplomatic channels, the United States encouraged Grenada to strongly confirm the recognition of Kosovo as a full member of the international community. The demarche also highlighted that derecognition would run contra the decision taken by over one hundred UN members, undermining democracy and stability in the region. Most importantly, the United States portrayed the derecognition of Kosovo as helping “backward elements in the region, working to undermine normalization efforts between Kosovo and Serbia and oppose the integration of the entire region into Euro-Atlantic institutions” (Novosti 2018b). It is also underlined that it would “act against the key efforts of the United States and the EU to tackle the fragility of the region” (Novosti 2018b).

The outcome of these diplomatic efforts to persuade third countries to reconsider the recognition of the claimant states is hard to predict as it depends on several factors, which are discussed later in this chapter. However, we can ascertain with confidence that efforts lead to three potential outcomes: (a) rejecting the request for derecognition, (b)

suspending or freezing the recognition, or (c) proceeding with formal withdrawal of recognition and ending of diplomatic ties. When it comes to the first possible outcome, this could be determined by several context-specific but also cross-case factors, such as the excessive price and high transactional and reputational cost, demands on time due to other pressing national and regional issues, and the tendency to raise the bid for derecognition. A case in point is Lesotho's reconsidering its position in Western Sahara. In 2019, Lesotho caused diplomatic drama when the foreign minister announced a reconsideration, only to have the government reject it just days later. On 4 October 2019, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lesotho announced the suspension of diplomatic ties with SADR "pending the outcome of the United Nations process" (MFA of Lesotho 2019). Five days later, the government of Lesotho issued a statement clarifying "the unfortunate, irregular publication of a confidential, State-to-State diplomatic communication between Lesotho and the KingdomPage 89 → of Morocco," and denied the suspension of recognition of SADR (Government of Lesotho 2019). According to this statement, the position of Lesotho advocated "Morocco's total withdrawal from the Saharawi territories it is currently occupying, and respect for the self-determination and territorial integrity of the SADR and its people" (Government of Lesotho 2019).

Another twist to this debacle emerged in December 2019, when Lesego Makgothi, minister of foreign affairs and international relations of the Kingdom of Lesotho, insisted on maintaining a neutral position on Western Sahara. Foreign Minister Makgothi added that Lesotho had "conducted a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of the kingdom of Lesotho's

position concerning this regional dispute,” concluding that “promoting a just and peaceful solution of this regional conflict will best be served by a ‘Neutral’ yet strong support of the Kingdom of Lesotho to the ongoing UN-led process under the guidance of the United Nations Secretary General and supervision of the United Nations (UN) Security Council” (Lesotho Times 2018). The foreign minister insisted that the note verbale dated 4 October 2019 was Lesotho’s “sovereign decision to suspend all its decisions and statements related to Western Sahara and ‘SADR,’ pending the outcome of the United Nations process” (Lesotho Times 2018). However, the Lesotho government spokesperson, Thesele Maseribane, soon denied for a second time the derecognition of Western Sahara, stating: “Lesotho has maintained its firm position of principles to support the struggle of the people of Western Sahara.” The controversy was finally settled in June 2020, when Lesotho’s new foreign minister, Matsepo Molise-Ramakoae, issued a statement on the country’s position on Western Sahara. The statement reaffirmed its support for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara and clarified that “any pronouncements made purporting to change Lesotho’s position on this issue are of no force and effect” (Government of Lesotho 2020: 4).

In the case of Taiwan, despite China’s diplomatic lobbying and economic incentives, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) declared its relationship with Taiwan to be based on mutual interests, not money. “We’re very happy with our relationship and intend to maintain it for a very long time because our friendship is based on our national interests and not on the size of Taiwan’s wallet,” a government spokesperson stated (Bloomberg 2017). Despite mixed messages sent by Czech politicians on reconsidering Kosovo’s

independence, ultimately the foreign minister of the Czech Republic, Tomas Petricek, stated: “The Czech Government, which is responsible for country’s foreign policy, hasn’t changed its stance towards Kosovo or any of the Western Balkans countries. We continue to support fully the dialogue between Page 90 →Serbia and Kosovo and their path to the EU” (Zëri 2019e). The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement recalling that the 2008 decision to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with Kosovo was “de jure recognition, ie full and final recognition of the state in terms of international law,” adding that “the Czech Republic has also never revoked the recognition of any state in its practice” (MFA of Czech Republic 2019). In the case of neighboring Slovenia, Serbia worked with a small pro-Russian socialist party to rethink the recognition of Kosovo. However, soon after, Slovenian minister of foreign affairs Miro Cerar dismissed the possibility of Slovenia revoking recognition of Kosovo, stating, “I think there was sufficient basis for recognition of Kosovo as a country” (N1 2019a).

The reconsideration of recognition is a significant stage in the derecognition process, and the diplomatic battle that takes place during this stage between pro-recognition and counter-recognition forces influences the prospects for retaining recognition or pursuing derecognition. It is not a predetermined process but open to diplomatic bargaining, external and internal pressure, and calculation of costs and benefits of all possible outcomes. The multiplicity of these factors often results in settling for in-between arrangements that permit all competing forces to declare their ambivalent victories.

Diplomatic Ambivalence: From Recognition without Engagement to Frozen Recognition

The third stage in the derecognition process comprises instances when third countries unilaterally reconsider their position on the claimant state and take affirmative actions by either suspending or freezing recognition of the claimant state. This entails taking intermediary measures that in effect resemble severance of diplomatic relations, namely moving from some sort of diplomatic relationship to nonrelationship. According to normal diplomatic practice, severance of diplomatic relations can be done by mutual consent or unilaterally, and it is a culmination of several reciprocal and retaliatory actions undertaken by both sides (Denza 2016). Historically, “The severance of diplomatic relations was an act of extreme gravity, often a prelude to a declaration of war” (Giegerich 2018: 1110). In the case of derecognition, consideration of suspension of recognition is unilateral and doesn’t involve hostile actions by the claimant state. Usually it starts by issuing antagonizing statements and flirting diplomatically with the other contender states. Meetings between diplomatic allies and the adversaries of the claimant state signal Page 91 →the possibility of switching or withdrawing recognition. This was the case with Panama and China prior to Panama’s derecognition of Taiwan in 2007. The president of the Dominican Republic made two trips to China before it derecognized Taiwan, signaling the instability of their bilateral relations (MFA of Taiwan 2018a). Third countries also engage in secretive talks (anti-diplomatic actions) on switching diplomatic ties among the contenders. In 2017, Burkina Faso’s foreign minister publicly admitted that people and companies with close

links to China had offered millions of dollars in exchange for the derecognition of Taiwan. While this was a warning sign, Burkina Faso stated it had no reason to reconsider the relationship with Taiwan (Taiwan News 2017). Yet this warning resulted in boosting Taiwan's investment in Burkina Faso's education, agriculture, and defense sectors. However, in 2018, Burkina Faso snubbed Taiwan and established diplomatic ties with China. In justifying the sudden change of position, the same foreign minister who praised diplomatic ties with Taiwan stated that "the evolution of the world and the socio-economic challenges of our country and region push us to reconsider our position" (New York Times 2018). The reason behind this sudden change was apparently an additional request of \$23 million from Burkina Faso that was rejected by Taiwan (Burcu and Bertrand 2019).

As part of the process of reconsidering ties with the claimant state, third countries can go halfway by suspending the recognition of the claimant state. This is especially observed when third countries frame derecognition decisions in vague language, leaving open the option of swinging back and forth according to changing circumstances. Suspending recognition is often framed as a strategic decision to encourage parties in conflict to resolve the disputes through peaceful dialogue. It amounts to some sort of formal recognition without diplomatic engagement. This form of derecognition resembles in reverse order features of "nonrecognition lite," or engagement without recognition—namely when third countries do not formally recognize the claimant state but in practice have active diplomatic interactions and support the claimant state's membership in international bodies (Coppieters 2020). In 2018, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Liberia informed its Serbian counterpart of the "reconsideration of its

decision to recognize independence of Kosovo” in order to allow “for a sustainable solution for citizens of Serbia and Province of Kosovo, as is being done through current negotiations,” adding that “this decision remains in effect until the discussion and negotiations are completed under the European Union” (MFA of Liberia 2018). Similarly, Grenada stated that “in the interim, the Government of Grenada suspends any previous decision or declaration on the questionPage 92 → as to the status of Kosovo . . . once the two parties reach an agreement, the Government of Grenada will steadfastly support the position reached by the parties” (MFA of Grenada 2018). In 2012, Dominica recognized Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state. In the original recognition letter, Dominica commended “the commitment of the people of Kosovo to build an independent state based on the principles of freedom and democracy” (Dominica News Online 2012). Six years later, in 2018, Serbia persuaded Dominica to temporarily suspend Kosovo’s recognition, indicating that when both sides came to an agreed settlement, Dominica would support the position they agreed on (Government of Serbia 2018a). On 5 July 2018, the Serbian foreign minister announced that Papua New Guinea had suspended the recognition of Kosovo. In a letter dated 27 June 2018, the minister of foreign affairs, Rimbink Pato, retracted the 2012 decision to recognize Kosovo’s independence, considering it “most appropriate to adopt a neutral stance . . . allowing both parties to find a peaceful and lasting solution” (MFAT of Papua New Guinea 2018). The derecognition letter concluded that “as a result of this position, any letters/communications issued by PNG in October 2012 recognizing Kosovo’s independence are to be terminated forthwith until both parties

complete the negotiations process and agree on the final status of Kosovo under the auspices of the EU and the UN pursuant to the UNSC Resolution 1244 referred to above” (MFAT of Papua New Guinea 2018).

Similarly, in the case of Western Sahara, the majority of countries that have agreed to reconsider their recognition of SADR have in fact only suspended or terminated their recognition pending a settlement between Morocco and the Polisario Front. In 2000, Honduras suspended the recognition of SADR pending the outcome of a referendum. However, on that occasion, the Moroccan Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Ministry twisted the reasoning behind suspended recognition and attributed this success to “the growing awareness that the Polisario entity is artificial, ephemeral and doomed to disappear” (Arabic News 2000). In 2007 Kenya decided to freeze the recognition of SADR “until the conflict is resolved, within the framework of the United Nations where progress is currently being made” (Maghess 2007). Soon after, Morocco restored diplomatic relations with Kenya. Yet in 2022 Kenya called “for the self-determination of Western Sahara through a free and fair referendum administered by the U.N. and the A.U.” (MFA of Kenya 2022).

There are instances when third countries claim they are taking a neutral position on the status of the claimant state. Serbia managed to convincePage 93 → several states to take a neutral stance on Kosovo’s independence, thus neither officially rescinding recognition nor continuing normal diplomatic relations. This is labeled “frozen recognition.” Freezing recognition involves less severe forms of diplomatic friction, which can entail suspending institutional contacts, not appointing an ambassador or opening an embassy,

or avoiding supporting or voting in favor for membership in international organizations. Egypt is a case in point. Egypt originally recognized Kosovo in 2013 during a period of democratic transition, which was interrupted by the military takeover of the country by General el-Sisi. The recognition of Kosovo by Egypt was never communicated to the Kosovo government directly. Instead, Egypt's letter on Kosovo recognition was sent to Germany and communicated to the public through a brief press statement.

Subsequently, Serbia targeted Egypt, arguing that Kosovo was recognized during the Muslim Brotherhood's brief period of governance and thus, given the organization's late outlaw status and expulsion from the political scene, the decision could be contested (B92 2018a). However, this argument doesn't stand because Kosovo was recognized by the MFA of Egypt, which was under the control of the military during Morsi's short-lived rule. This partially explains why Egypt did not formally withdraw the recognition of Kosovo. Moreover, the Egyptian ambassador in Serbia, Ezzedine Fahmy, stated: "International law does not allow the withdrawal of state recognition of another state, this is an irreversible obligation. Thus, withdrawing Egypt's recognition of Kosovo became impossible according to the law" (Al-Ahram 2016). Under these circumstances, Serbia claimed that Egypt had frozen the recognition of Kosovo, which, according to the Egyptian foreign minister, meant "there is no implementation of this decision until the negotiations confirm that this status is in accordance with international law" (RTS 2018). In the words of the Egyptian ambassador in Serbia, Egypt "will not develop our relations with Kosovo. There will be no exchange of embassies between the two countries. Our position will remain constant. There will be no kind of diplomatic representation until things become clear in Serbia and there is a referendum on this issue" (Al-Ahram 2016). With President el-Sisi, Egypt

has not advanced any further in economic or diplomatic ties with Kosovo and has often abstained when Kosovo has aspired to membership in international organizations (B92 2018b).

However, frozen recognition is often an intermediary and prolonged phase, frequently ending with the withdrawal of recognition. For example, Barbados froze the recognition of SADR in 2013 until it decided to withdraw the recognition in 2019. Having recognized Western Sahara on 6
Page 94 → March 2014, Malawi derecognized it in 2017, stating the wish to maintain a neutral position vis-à-vis “the regional conflict over the Sahara” (New Times 2017). For Morocco, a neutral stance by third countries on Western Sahara amounted to support for Morocco’s sovereignty and territorial integrity as taking the position in effect legitimized the status quo of Morocco’s control over the occupied parts of Sahara. Despite claiming to take a neutral stance, in the derecognition letter to SADR, Bolivia affirmed commitment to “the principles of mutual respect, sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in the internal affairs of Morocco” (Government of Bolivia 2020).

In the case of Kosovo, in May 2018 Ghana signaled it would reconsider its position. During a visit to Belgrade, Aaron Mike Oquaye, speaker of Ghana’s parliament, stated that he would “suggest to the president and foreign minister of Ghana to re-examine the decision on the status of Kosovo” in exchange for Serbia’s economic and military assistance (N1 2018b). However, in June 2018, President Hashim Thaçi of Kosovo accepted the credential letters from Ghana’s nonresident ambassador to Kosovo, Salma Frances Mancell (President of Kosovo 2018). On that occasion the

Ghanian diplomat expressed her desire to deepen the bilateral ties between the two countries. But in a sudden turn of events, Serbian foreign minister Ivica Dačić and Ghanaian foreign minister Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey met later in 2018 in Belgrade to “reconsider the decision to recognize an independent Kosovo made by the previous administration, adding that it was the chief obstacle to the development of relations with Serbia” (Beta 2018). The Ghanaian foreign minister stated: “It’s true the decision was made (to recognize Kosovo’s independence), but what matters is our presence here, today. The decision has been the main obstacle to the development of relations. Yet, we are here now. No one from the Ghanaian government has visited Kosovo” (Beta 2018). In May 2019, Dačić visited Ghana, where he requested that Ghana revoke its decision to recognize Kosovo and revert to “a status-neutral position pending the conclusion of the dialogue and to honor the outcome of the dialogue which would be presented in the United Nations” (MFA of Serbia 2019b). Finally, in November 2019, Ghana took the decision to derecognize Kosovo, stating that its previous decision was premature and contravened international norms and laws. Dačić hailed the decision as “the result of a state policy pursued by Serbia for many years, adding that such a decision by that African state required a year and a half of talks and meetings and a lot of work” (Novinar 2019). Dačić affirmed that “the talks with Ghana had been going on for a long time, that all levels had been discussed, Page 95 →that Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Parliament Speaker Maja Gojkovic and he as Foreign Minister had also talked with the representatives of that country” (Blic 2019). Serbia’s foreign minister stated that Ghana’s decision to withdraw recognition could influence other countries, especially African countries, to derecognize Kosovo.

The suspension and freezing of recognition are misleading practices that don't correspond to the provisions of diplomatic law on the suspension of diplomatic relations. As shown in this section, third states that reconsider the recognition of the claimant state tend to settle temporarily for a variant that can be labeled "recognition without engagement," which entails suspending bilateral contacts without formally announcing the withdrawal of recognition. Another intermediary and ambivalent variant is labeled "frozen recognition," a pragmatic move to reduce criticism and backlash from domestic and international forces and avoid the question of the legality of derecognition. Regardless of the terminology, both of these intermediary variants appear to be tactics to maximize the potential profits from either reversing the original position or going full scale and formally withdrawing recognition of the claimant state. Moreover, these intermediary variants seem to be more prevalent when the claimant state doesn't have either formal diplomatic relations or close bilateral ties with the derecognizing state.

The Full Withdrawal of Recognition

The final stage in the derecognition process is the full withdrawal of recognition of the claimant state. In most cases, derecognition is formalized through a note verbale sent to the former base state conforming to the derecognition of the claimant state and subsequently reaffirming the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the former base state over the derecognized state. Like the recognition note, the express intent is crucial to ascertain whether the decision entails withdrawal of recognition and whether the issuing authority has legal powers. In other words, the derecognition note needs to explicitly state that country X withdraws or

revokes the recognition of country Y. An example of a clear expression of withdrawal of recognition is Vanuatu's derecognition of Abkhazia in 2011. The letter stated, "The prime minister of Vanuatu, the Honourable Nipake Edward Natapei, has today cancelled and withdrew [*sic*] Vanuatu's recognition of the, so called, [*sic*] independent state of the Republic of Abkhazia" (Government of Vanuatu 2011). In addition, the letter acknowledged that Abkhazia is "a break-away autonomous Page 96 → province of the Republic of Georgia." In this iteration, withdrawal of recognition takes the shape of re-recognition of the other contender entity or state. Similarly, when Peru withdrew recognition of SADR in 2022, it issued a statement stating that "taking into account that there is no effective bilateral relationship to date, the Government of the Republic of Peru decides to withdraw its recognition of SADR and break all relations with this entity" (MFA of Peru 2022). In the same letter, Peru expressed its "respect for the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Morocco, its national sovereignty, and the autonomy plan relating to this regional dispute."

Another relevant example is the case of China and Taiwan. What follows the announcement of derecognition is ending diplomatic ties with the claimant state and subsequently either re-establishing or deepening diplomatic relations with the other contender state. Withdrawal of recognition amounts to the unilateral termination of diplomatic relations. So, in this instance, state derecognition is particularly relevant in a situation where two states compete for recognition and where shifting recognition from one entity to the other requires first derecognizing the previously recognized entity. Mainland China refuses double recognition; that is, countries that recognize China cannot have diplomatic relations with Taiwan (Chiang and Hwang

2008: 65). For example, in 2017 the joint communication between China and Gambia was labeled a “resumption of diplomatic relations.” What this entails is that Gambia “recognizes that there is only one China in the world, and that the Government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China and that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory,” and that agreed “not to establish any official relations or engage in any official contacts with Taiwan” (MFA of China 2016).

Following another derecognition, the MFA of China declared that it “highly commends the decision of the Solomon Islands’ government to recognize the one-China principle and sever the so-called ‘diplomatic ties’ with the Taiwan authorities” (MFA of China 2019). Soon after, China and Solomon Islands established diplomatic relations and agreed “to develop friendly relations on the basis of the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality, mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence” (Xinhua Net 2019). Similarly, when Tuvalu in 2014 retracted its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it established diplomatic relations with Georgia, committing to territorial integrity in its internationally recognized borders, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Radio Free Europe Page 97 →2014). Georgia established diplomatic relations with Vanuatu following the derecognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

While derecognition of a claimant state could mean re-recognition of the base state, this is not always true. In the case of Kosovo, Lesotho in 2018 issued a two-page decision outlining the reasons for derecognition and

explicitly stated that “the Government of the Kingdom of Lesotho revokes all previous statements made with regards to the status of Kosovo, especially those that could be interpreted in a way as the recognition of Kosovo” (MFA of Lesotho 2018). However, this letter ambiguously revokes the recognition of Kosovo and doesn’t make explicit reference to Serbia’s sovereignty over Kosovo, but that is implied by other provisions of the letter, such as the addressing of the letter to the MFA of Serbia. Similarly, when Papua New Guinea derecognized Kosovo, it framed the decision as termination of its original recognition decision issued in 2012, pending the completion of negotiation and agreement on the final status of Kosovo (MFAT of Papua New Guinea 2018). While the notion of termination alludes to ending a diplomatic relationship, in this instance it is not clear whether the decision is definitive or interim, especially since other conditional clauses are attached to the termination of recognition. This is explained by the fact that Serbia tolerates double or dual recognition. In other words, when third countries recognized Kosovo, Serbia did not break diplomatic relations with those third countries. When Kosovo was recognized in the first instance, Serbia either sent a protest note, temporarily pulled its ambassador, or symbolically suspended bilateral cooperation, but it did not cut diplomatic ties. It is strategically convenient for Serbia to maintain relations with those states as it offers access to domestic actors to gain momentum to push for derecognition. Permanently cutting diplomatic ties would make the derecognition campaign much more difficult. So when the derecognition campaign comes to fruition and the claimant state is derecognized, the contender state usually re-establishes or deepens diplomatic relations with the derecognizing states by immediately signing political, economic, and military agreements. In other words, for the former base state, the

derecognition of the claimant state represents an opportunity to restore and deepen bilateral ties with the derecognizing states, especially in implementing derecognition conditions. Thus, it remains questionable whether the derecognition letter should refer to the transfer of recognition and statehood entitlement to the former base state, which entails references to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the latter.

Most countries that derecognize the claimant state tend to cut off diplomaticPage 98 → correspondence with it and communicate the derecognition decision only to the government of the contender state. For example, in 2019 the Government of El Salvador “informed the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco of its decision to withdraw its recognition of SADR and to break all contact with this entity” (Morocco World News 2019b). However, it is also communicated to the derecognized state in certain instances. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Suriname (2017) informed Kosovo authorities that “after careful consideration, the Government of the Republic of Suriname has decided to revoke the recognition of Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state.” Similarly, the Solomon Islands’ derecognition note was communicated to the Embassy of Kosovo in Canberra via the Solomon Islands High Commission in Australia. The note conveys “the decision the Government of Solomon Islands has taken on the recognition of the Republic of Kosovo, until negotiations under the auspices of the European Union is concluded” (Solomon Islands High Commission in Australia 2018). While there might be a period of international reaction and condemnation following such a decision, things tend to settle down quickly and disappear from the international agenda. In this instance, although the derecognition of the claimant state might appear

to be a fresh recognition of the former base state, in essence it is nothing but a reaffirmation of the sovereignty of the former base state over the contested territory, given that both countries already have diplomatic relations and recognize one another.

Regarding the procedural formalities concerning the decision-making and the announcement of derecognition, practices vary across the board. As with many other foreign policy decisions, there is little public information on the political process and institutional deliberation when it comes to state derecognition. In legal doctrine and practice, establishing diplomatic relations is a bilateral, mutual, and reciprocal act (James 2016: 263). However, in the case of derecognition, both the withdrawal of recognition and the breach of diplomatic relations tend to be unilateral acts initiated and imposed by third countries under the tutelage and instructions of the former base state. Sometimes the derecognition decision is made public, but in other instances only a press release is issued, with few details. Notably, as discussed in the next chapter, the derecognition letter usually contains a brief normative and political justification. It tends to replicate the diplomatic narrative of the former base state, which bears the marks of the transactional nature of derecognition. In most cases, the decision to derecognize is exclusively taken by the executive branches of government with little public or political deliberation. The derecognition process and the ultimate decision are surrounded with Page 99 → secrecy and ambiguity, which is a testimony to how contested and anti-diplomatic this practice is but also a reflection of the diplomatic culture of derecognizing states characterized by solid power and

authoritarian attitudes of state leaders, who make foreign policy decisions based on personal interests and ideological and relational ties with little regard for international norms and principles (Spies 2019).

While the derecognition process is often kept away from the public eye, the Solomon Islands' derecognition of Taiwan in 2019 is a unique case of a deliberative derecognition process, or at least one that resembles a policy-informed process. In June 2019, the Solomon Islands warned Taiwan that it was reconsidering transference of allegiance to China. Its foreign minister, Jeremiah Manele stated: "It is a sovereign decision, a matter for the Solomon Islands government to look at. On that note, the government is making a comprehensive assessment of the issue so that the government, the caucus, and the cabinet is well informed on the matter" (The Guardian 2019). He denied, however, that Taiwan's ties with the Solomon Islands were at risk. Taiwan initially disregarded this move and hoped it could count on soft pressure from Australia, which opposes China's expansionist policy in the Pacific region, and renewed support from the Solomon Islands cabinet and parliament (Taiwan News 2019b). One year earlier, as stated in the Framework Co-operation Agreement, the Solomon Islands reiterated "the inalienable right of the Government and people of the Republic of China (Taiwan) to be a member of international and regional organizations, and to participate fully and fairly in the affairs of the international community" (Government of Taiwan 2017). To review its diplomatic ties with Taiwan, the Solomon Islands government established a task force, which sent officials to China to weigh the benefits of an eventual switch.

Parallel to this, the Foreign Relations Committee of the National Parliament of Solomon Islands launched an inquiry into severing existing ties with Taiwan (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2019). The government's bipartisan task force was established "to assess the gains of the current bilateral relations with ROC and to provide a strategy for the government to counter any positive and negative impacts of a potential switch" (Government of Solomon Islands 2019: 5). In carrying out this review of diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the task force committee, which lawmakers in favor of a diplomatic shift dominated, visited China and neighboring Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu (Government of Solomon Islands 2019: 9). Taking into account the economic and geopolitical benefits, on 13 September 2019 this task force recommended the establishment of new Page 100 → diplomatic relations with China and the severance of the thirty-six-year-old diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Government of Solomon Islands 2019: 5). During the period of reassessing diplomatic ties with Taiwan, Solomon Islands prime minister Manasseh Sogavare sent mixed messages. In August 2019, he praised Taiwan's assistance to the country and called them the two countries friends. In contrast, a month later, prior to announcing derecognition, he called Taiwan "completely useless to us," suggesting that "China could be a better diplomatic partner for the Pacific nation because it could stand up to Australia" (The Australian 2019).

Opposition parties in the Solomon Islands were against switching the country's diplomatic allegiance to China. The Foreign Relations Committee in parliament formulated its report in November 2019, recommending that, instead of severing its existing ties, "the Solomon Islands Government

should deepen its relationship with the Republic of China (Taiwan)” (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2019: 11). The report criticized the government’s decision as “carried out in a hasty manner and strongly condemn[ed] the manner in which the decision was reached” (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2019: 24). The committee noted that the Solomon Islands government failed to respect the constitutional rules governing the establishment and severance of diplomatic ties with other states. The committee stated that “it is deeply troubling that . . . the sovereignty of parliament and the sovereignty of Solomon Islands [and] that legislative processes are usurped by external considerations [and] pressured by foreign actors with little regard for Solomon Islands’ internal processes” (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2019: 34). In the meantime, Taiwan tried to prevent derecognition by promoting a discourse that called out China’s empty promises of aid that trapped small nations in debt they were unable to pay, thus forcing them to share national assets and sovereignty with China (Malay Mail 2019). The Taiwanese MFA described the report of the task force as biased and distorted and called “all sectors of Solomon Islands to reject the predetermined conclusions of the report and the debt trap they may lead to” (MFA of Taiwan 2019a).

Claimant states also utilize their allies to lobby to prevent derecognition. For example, in 2019, a member of the US National Security Council visited the Solomon Islands to discuss issues with government leaders, and a Taiwan deputy foreign minister also attended the meeting (Taiwan News 2019b). Similarly, Australian prime minister Scott Morrison also visited the country to maintain the status quo and counterbalance China’s increased influence in the Pacific region. While such a position is de facto derecognition,Page 101 →

in practice it can take the shape of a neutral stance or the temporary suspension of recognition and the freezing of diplomatic ties. Suspending and freezing recognition in practice has taken the shape of severing diplomatic contacts with the claimant state and deepening political and economic relations with the former host state despite pledging to take a neutral position (Middle East Monitor 2018). It is expected that once recognition is suspended, official relations and exchanges will no longer take place between the two countries. Thus, unclear boundaries among these indicative forms of derecognition create conceptual and practical confusion in interpreting their meaning and significance.

The Aftermath of State Derecognition

In the aftermath of derecognition, the claimant state faces serious dilemmas in responding. In all iterations, derecognition is a significant diplomatic move, signifying an end to diplomatic relations. Derecognition not only has a symbolic effect; it also directly impacts the ability of a derecognized state to protect its citizens abroad, cooperate with foreign governments on legal and judicial matters, and have diplomatic access to specialized international bodies. The retaliatory opportunities of claimant states following their derecognition are limited. Apart from expressing regret and cutting diplomatic ties, they are often vulnerable and limited in what they can do in return. Nonetheless, derecognized states have two significant ways to respond. The first option is to condemn derecognition and end the bilateral relations with the derecognizing state, including the closing of embassies, ending economic, political, and technical cooperation, and withdrawal of citizens, as appropriate. The second option is to contest the legal and political grounds of derecognition process and act. While in the first instance

the claimant state accepts the derecognition decision and reciprocates by discontinuing bilateral relations, in the second instance the claimant state questions the unilateral character of recognition and thus rejects it since the principle of mutual consensual and reciprocal derecognition isn't fulfilled.

Taiwan's diplomatic approach resembles the first mode of response to derecognition. Although Taiwan considers derecognition a "unilateral termination of diplomatic relations" by the derecognizing state (MFA of Taiwan 2018c), it tends to respond to the humiliating withdrawal of recognition by certain states with mutual derecognition, which has entailed ending diplomatic relations as well as cutting all bilateral political and economic cooperation. Page 102 → Mutual derecognition seems to hurt the emerging state; for example, Taiwan may have only domestic or strategic costs in the derecognizing states. However, the fact that derecognizing states are UN members protects them from the effects of mutual derecognition.

In most cases, when Taiwan was derecognized, it expressed regret and discontent with the derecognizing state's decision. It also strongly protested against and condemned China and its efforts to diminish Taiwan's international space. For instance, following derecognition by Panama, the Taiwanese government expressed "indignation and deep regret over Panama's unilateral decision to sever diplomatic relations" (MFA of Taiwan 2017). Likewise, Taiwan expressed "profound disappointment, regret, and outrage that the government of Burkina Faso has succumbed to the enticements of dollar diplomacy" (MFA of Taiwan 2018b). In response to El Salvador's derecognition, Taiwan immediately terminated diplomatic

relations, to uphold its national dignity. This involved ending all cooperation and assistance projects, closing its embassy, and recalling its diplomatic and civilian staff.

Similarly, when the Dominican Republic switched to China after seventy-seven years of diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the Taiwanese government announced “the termination of relations with the Dominican Republic, effective immediately . . . to protect both the nation’s dignity and sovereignty” (MFA of Taiwan 2018a). Taiwan also tends to express official feelings and pass judgment on the character of countries that withdraw their recognition. For instance, when Malawi derecognized Taiwan, its criticism was explicit. Taiwan regretted, it said, that “the leaders and government of Malawi have forsaken their national dignity, turned their back on commitments made to Taiwan and sold their soul to China” (MFA of Taiwan 2008). In the aftermath of derecognition, Taiwan has a tradition of immediately ending diplomatic relations with the derecognizing state and terminating bilateral assistance projects and technical missions. “Without concern for long-established ties, the wishes of the Dominican people, or the years of developmental assistance provided the nation by Taiwan, the administration has accepted over-blown promises of investment and aid by China” (MFA of Taiwan 2018a). When the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched allegiance to China in 2019, the Taiwanese government demanded that both countries “immediately recall its government personnel from Taiwan” (MFA of Taiwan 2019b). In the case of Taiwan, other remaining diplomatic allies often send reassuring messages that they will continue their diplomatic allegiance with Taipei. For example, when Nauru abruptly

derecognized Taiwan Page 103 →in January 2024, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu reaffirmed their diplomatic recognition and solidarity with Taiwan (Radio New Zealand 2024).

In contrast, there are instances when the claimant state continues informal and unofficial relations with the derecognizing state. Therefore, the end of diplomatic relations does not necessarily mean the end of diplomatic interactions between the derecognized and derecognizing states. As Barston (2013: 27–28) argues, “In these cases involving non-recognition, de-recognition or exiled entities, several different mechanisms have evolved for transacting official and other business. These include the honorary representative, liaison office, representative office and trade mission.” In a number of cases, after derecognition Taiwan has tried to retain a presence in countries it once had diplomatic ties with in the hope of a future re-recognition. Although Papua New Guinea derecognized Taiwan in 1999, it continued to maintain informal contacts and, on certain occasions, voted in favor of Taiwan at international forums (Yang 2011: 62). After severing diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the Solomon Islands government claimed that the “people-to-people relationship, cultural exchanges, trade relations and investment . . . will continue as long as Taiwan and Solomon Islands continue to exist on planet earth” (Solomon Times 2019b). Taiwan, however, characterized derecognition a diplomatic tactic aimed to “diminish Taiwan’s international presence, hurt the Taiwanese people, and gradually suppress and eliminate Taiwan’s sovereignty” (MFA of Taiwan 2019b). Taiwan expressed regret at “the São Tomé and Príncipe government’s abrupt and unfriendly decision and condemns this action” (MFA of Taiwan 2016). Following derecognition by the Solomon Islands and Kiribati in 2019,

Taiwan's foreign minister warned the Pacific nations that "from the long-term strategic perspective, like-minded friends and partners should really be worried whether the Pacific will remain free and open, and whether the key actors follow the rules-based international order" (Reuters 2019c).

The second option involves ignoring and disregarding the decision to derecognize in the hope that the decision turns out to be premature, temporal, and reversible. This mode of response is also conditioned on how visible and explicit the derecognition process and decision are. The more ambiguous the derecognition decision, the higher the likelihood that the derecognized state will challenge it. This form of response to derecognition intends to minimize and mitigate the broad negative impact and spillover effect on other countries that follow a similar derecognition trajectory. Kosovo's experience resembles the second form of response. Kosovo has denied that Page 104 → most countries that have derecognized it have actually done so given that the MFA of Kosovo has not received any formal notification of the decisions for freezing, suspending, or withdrawing recognition. As the texts in most of the derecognition notes are almost identical and use the same rationales, Kosovo has alleged that Serbian diplomats drafted these derecognition notes and then had them signed or sealed by particular parties within the derecognizing states (Assembly of Kosovo 2018). Kosovo's foreign minister Behgjet Pacolli stated, "I assure you that Kosovo as an entity, as the main address of these verbal notes, has not received any verbal note from these states where it is said that our state has withdrawn its recognition, respectively has ceased relations with your state" (Assembly of Kosovo 2018). The Kosovo MFA refuted the derecognition by Lesotho, describing it as fake news. "As in previous cases

this ‘document’ has been produced in Belgrade to produce a fake news, at the time Kosovo is working intensively to become a factor in powerful international organisation, whereas Serbia’s diplomacy has no tools to prevent this process” (MFA of Kosovo 2018c). After the Union of Comoros derecognized Kosovo, the MFA of Kosovo issued a statement asserting that “all of the countries Serbia is referring to have confirmed that it is about fake news and their recognitions, pursuant to the international relations practice, are irreversible acts” (MFA of Kosovo 2018a). Kosovo denied the derecognition decision of Ghana on the same basis, maintaining that “Ghana has an accredited ambassador in Kosovo. Ghana also has an honorary consul in Kosovo that represents them. Minister Pacolli has recently met with Ghana’s Foreign Minister at the United Nations in New York” (Koha 2019b).

To downplay the significance of derecognition, Kosovo’s foreign ministry intentionally refused to update the list of countries that have recognized the country, which nurtured domestic and international confusion on the exact number of states that have recognized Kosovo. In a number of other instances Kosovo has argued against the possibility of states’ withdrawing recognition. On the occasion of Suriname’s derecognition of Kosovo in October 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo reacted by pointing out that “first, in the international law there is no concept of withdrawing a recognition, there is the freezing of diplomatic relations or the withdrawal of diplomatic staff; second, there is no state called ‘Kosovo and Metohija’ as in the letter presented in Belgrade, but in international relations exists a sovereign and independent country called the Republic of Kosovo” (Balkan Insight 2017). In an interview with the press in 2018, the prime minister of

Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, admitted, “We are not protected from revocations of recognitions, this possibility exists. I don’t know how the revocation Page 105 →from Burundi came about, but we are interested that nobody damages Kosovo’s interests and its strategic plan” (Prishtina Insight 2018). Only in 2020 did Kosovo come to terms with the ramifications of Serbia’s derecognition campaign. For example, when the new government led by Albin Kurti came to power in February 2020, it pledged to formulate a new foreign policy strategy targeted at “countries who have not yet declared about the independence of Kosovo; for countries who have not recognized Kosovo, and for those who have declared for the withdrawal of recognition” (Government of Kosovo 2021). Kosovo’s foreign minister at that time, Glauk Konjufca, stated, “Our government started operations on 4 February. Foreign policy has been in a serious crisis in recent years. There is an aggressive Serbian campaign to get countries to withdraw recognition of Kosovo. Twelve to fifteen countries are affected, most of them in the Pacific region and Africa” (Stuttgarter Zeitung 2020).

In response to all the derecognition decisions announced by Serbia, Kosovo admitted that the Solomon Islands was the only country that notified it about the decision to withdraw recognition. In a note verbale sent on November 2018, soon after the announcement of derecognition, Kosovo’s MFA reminded the Solomon Islands authorities that “Kosovo is and remains an independent and sovereign state recognized by 116 countries, including by the Solomon Islands” and that “under international law de-jure recognition, like that of the government of the Solomon Islands, is definitive” (MFA of Kosovo 2018b). The letter went on to remind the Solomon Islands that the two countries “established diplomatic relations based on the principles of

the UN Charter and the provisions of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961” and that both had “enjoyed cordial relations and had no bilateral or multilateral dispute, but contrary, shared similar values and principles” (MFA of Kosovo 2018b). Thus, for Kosovo, “Once full and formal recognition has been granted, and diplomatic relations have been established, withdrawal of recognition is not permitted nor cannot retrospectively undermine sovereign statehood.” It backed up the statement with Article 6 of the Montevideo Convention, which stipulates that “recognition is unconditional and irrevocable.” Moreover, the MFA of Kosovo (2018b) noted that

any attempt to withdraw the recognition for political, economic, or personal interests would contradict the initial decision in favour of recognition and constitute a breach of fundamental norms of the international law, such as requirement for promoting peaceful and Page 106 →friendly relations between nations, it would undermine the principle of sovereign equality, and may work against the commitment of states for non-interference in internal affairs.

The Kosovo MFA note insisted that “in the view of the government of Kosovo, Kosovo and the Solomon Islands have diplomatic relations established fully under international law as two independent and sovereign states, and as such, these diplomatic relations are valid” (MFA of Kosovo 2018b). Finally, the MFA of Kosovo (2018b) expressed the wish “to continue the cordial relations established with the Solomon Islands” and stated the commitment “to dispatch a Special Envoy to the Solomon Islands

to discuss with your esteemed government all raised issues and clarify the misunderstanding created in the bilateral relations between Kosovo and the Solomon Islands.”

Abkhazia and South Ossetia tend to take an approach similar to Kosovo’s. For instance, they have exploited the confusion over institutional and constitutional responsibility for recognizing Abkhazia, which has been caused by Pacific island states such as Vanuatu and Tuvalu, to deny their derecognition. Originally, when Vanuatu recognized Abkhazia in 2011, conflicting reports came from three governmental instances: while allegedly Vanuatu’s prime minister signed the agreement to establish diplomatic relations, a senior adviser to Vanuatu’s government sent confusing messages, along with the country’s ambassador to the UN, who “strongly denied Abkhazia’s claims that Vanuatu had recognized it” (Civil Georgia 2011c). The Vanuatuan ambassador further stated, “We don’t know who is responsible for declaring that this is true. As far as we are concerned, we are dealing with Georgia, not Abkhazia” (Civil Georgia 2011b). Vanuatu signaled the recognition of Abkhazia in May 2011 by signing a memorandum enhancing bilateral relations and mutual interests. However, the Supreme Court of Vanuatu declared that the government of Prime Minister Sato Kilman was unconstitutional and invalid. Soon after the new interim government came to power, the new prime minister, Nipake Edward Natapei, “cancelled and withdrew Vanuatu’s recognition of the, so called, independent state of the Republic of Abkhazia, which is a break-away autonomous province of the Republic of Georgia” (Government of Vanuatu 2011). Soon after, the overthrown government returned to power and sent mixed messages regarding the recognition of Abkhazia. The foreign minister

of Vanuatu, Alfred Carlot, sent a letter to the MFA of Abkhazia conveying the message that “the Council of Minister of Vanuatu has voted in favour of supporting the Republic of Abkhazia in Page 107 →establishing diplomatic and financial ties between our respective nations” (MFA of Vanuatu 2011). In this letter Vanuatu stated that it “would like to re-assure that the memorandum dated 23 May 2011 is valid and remains in force despite earlier announcement” (MFA of Vanuatu 2011). Finally, in 2013 Georgia and Vanuatu signed an agreement on establishing diplomatic and consular relations, putting an end to the confusion and uncertainty over recognition of Abkhazia by this Pacific Island state. The Georgian foreign minister stated that the decision of Vanuatu put an “end to the previously existing confusion in this regard and represents an unambiguous support to Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as unequivocal respect for fundamental principles of international law” (Civil Georgia 2013).

Similarly, in 2011 Tuvalu recognized Abkhazia and both governments signed a joint statement on establishing diplomatic relations. However, in 2014, Tuvalu established diplomatic ties with Georgia, indicating severing diplomatic relations and withdrawal of recognition of Abkhazia. The reaction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia was a statement asserting that the Abkhazia had not received official notification from the authorities of Tuvalu about the severance of diplomatic relations; therefore, these relations continued. On that occasion, it appears that the Government of Abkhazia decided to do nothing and ignore this anti-diplomatic move and avoid becoming implicated in the game of demanding money for recognition/derecognition every time a government changed. Similarly, when Tuvalu derecognized South Ossetia, the foreign minister of South Ossetia

stated it had “not received notifications from Tuvalu about changes in positions. It is not possible to comment on the statements of the Georgian Foreign Ministry and the information circulated in the media until we receive any legally relevant documents” (State News Agency RES 2014). Former foreign minister of Abkhazia Viacheslav Chirikba (2013: 11) stated: “There is no doubt that the most important source of the legitimacy of a State is the recognition of its legitimacy first of all by its people, and not some external factors, including the diplomatic recognition by other states or the declarations made by some governments or international organizations.”

For the SADR, however, both recognition and withdrawal or suspension of recognition are political decisions states make in their bilateral relations with other states. In this sense, as a matter of policy, it admits that states can, at will, recognize, withdraw, or suspend their recognition of other states. However, the SADR takes the position that recognition is unconditional and irrevocable as stipulated by the rules of international law of recognition Page 108 → of states contained in the 1933 Montevideo Convention. Once other states have recognized the SADR as a sovereign state, they cannot revoke their recognition, unless the SADR or the recognizing states no longer exist.

In most cases, the international community is silent on state derecognition. In particular, organized reactions or sanctions are not expected against derecognizing states and their patron state. However, the interests of global and regional powers are affected by the derecognition of the claimant state. In that case, they tend to react and undertake retaliatory measures against the derecognizing states in certain instances. Although the United States does not formally recognize Taiwan, it remains one of its main international

allies. In reaction to the derecognition of Taiwan by Dominican Republic and El Salvador, the United States temporarily recalled its top diplomats in protest. In a swift response to the US criticism, Chinese diplomats stated that “as a sovereign country, the Dominican Republic had the absolute right to decide its own foreign policy and that no other nation had the right to interfere” (Reuters 2018a). Following the derecognition of Taiwan by El Salvador, there were rumors that Guatemala was considering switching to China as well. US senator Marco Rubio warned Guatemala that if it derecognized Taiwan, the United States might withdraw foreign aid (Taiwan News 2018). In response to the Solomon Islands’ and Kiribati’s derecognition in September 2019, the United States and Taiwan organized a joint event with Taiwan’s remaining four partners in the Pacific region to increase cooperation and “to meet the development needs of Taiwan’s diplomatic partners in the Pacific.” Highlighting China’s aggressive and military intentions in the Pacific, Taiwanese foreign minister Joseph Wu called on “all responsible stakeholders in the region to realize the value of Taiwan’s presence in the Pacific, and push back strongly against China’s efforts to erode that presence” (South China Morning Post 2019a). In an attempt to prevent further loss of diplomatic allies, the US deputy assistant secretary of state responsible for the region, Sandra Oudkirk, stated that “Taiwan is a force for good in the Pacific, and in the world. That is why we firmly support Taiwan’s relationships with Pacific Island nations” (South China Morning Post 2019a).

The derecognition saga, however, does not end with the formal withdrawal of recognition because there are many examples when third countries have resumed full diplomatic relations and thus re-recognized the claimant state

afresh. This also partially resembles the diplomatic practice of states after cutting bilateral ties (Constantinou, Kerr, and Sharp 2016). The prospects for re-recognition are predominantly influenced by the level of political, economic, and cultural ties the claimant state has with the re-recognizingPage 109 → state. Especially if there are linkages between derecognized states and a political faction that comes to power, chances for retrieving recognition are high. Though such domestic polarization has turned diplomatic derecognition into a fluid foreign policy instrument, what evolves depends on which political faction comes to power. Re-recognition is often branded as restoration and resumption of diplomatic relations, which signifies that derecognition in the first instance did not bring into question the factual existence of the derecognized state. An example is Taiwan's resumption of diplomatic relations with Saint Lucia in 2007 after a decade of derecognition. This was formalized by signing a Joint Communiqué on the Reestablishment of Diplomatic Relations. What led to re-recognition is a better deal offered by Taiwan and disappointment among the local population with China's limited investment in the country. Taiwan promised to "help St. Lucia diversify agriculture, help tourism, develop livestock and create information technology learning centers" (New York Times 2007). Similarly, Nauru re-recognized Taiwan in 2005 after claiming that Chinese assistance pledges were not fulfilled as promised, restoring diplomatic relations after unilaterally severing ties in 2002 (Rich and Dahmer 2018). Nauru expressed regret about past mistakes. Restoring full diplomatic ties resumed Taiwan's education, agriculture, fisheries, tourism, healthcare, and aquaculture assistance. In turn, Nauru offered its position as a UN member to lobby for and represent Taiwan's interests within multilateral organizations. Similarly, Vanuatu for a while served as a strong supporter of

Taiwan in international organizations. In the face of this rotating recognition, Taiwan over the years has become “disinclined to fight to maintain diplomatic recognition with states who swap sides to recognize the PRC for increased economic aid” (Brady and Henderson 2010: 195).

In another part of the world, Zambia, Malawi, and Mauritius have derecognized and re-recognized SADR several times over the years, as did Burkina Faso. Saint Lucia first recognized Taiwan in 1984, then derecognized it in 1997 only to restore ties with Taiwan in 2007 and, finally, switch back to China in 2011. The diplomatic logic was to grant recognition to the highest bidder (BBC 2017). In 2015, Mauritius agreed to recognize “anew the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a sovereign State, in line with the aim of the Government to forge new relationships across the world as enunciated in the Government Programme 2015–2019” (All Africa 2015). Similarly, Zambian authorities derecognized and re-recognized Western Sahara in months (Zambian Watchdog 2017). In 2018, Guinea-Bissau re-recognized Kosovo, reversing the decision in late 2017 to derecognize, stating Page 110 →that it “continue[s] to recognize Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state.” This back-and-forth foreign policy of small states has led to the emergence of rental of diplomatic recognition. Burundi froze the recognition of Western Sahara in 2006. In 2008, it decided to restore the recognition because “this decision stems from the will of the Government of the Republic of Burundi to better integrate the country into the East African Community, the Member States of which together have opted for a harmonization of the external policy for the sake of synergy in order to create a truly integrated space” (MFA of Burundi 2008). However, in 2010, Burundi again decided to withdraw its recognition of the SADR “to

encourage, like many other countries, the UN process and the momentum brought about by the Moroccan autonomy initiative” (Agence Maghreb Arabe Presse 2010). In 2020, Bolivia announced suspension of its ties with the SADR in exchange for Morocco’s recognition of the interim president, Jeanine Añez Chávez, who came to power after a chaotic election. However, as soon as she left office and leftist parties came to power, the decision was reversed. In September 2021, Bolivia issued a press statement announcing the strengthening of diplomatic relations with the SADR. It noted that “diplomatic relations were interrupted by a misguided press release issued on January 2, 2020, during the de facto government of Jeanine Añez, which does not reflect the universal commitment to fight against colonialism and preservation of peace, traditionally upheld by the Bolivian government” (MFA of Bolivia 2021). While the Bolivian MFA reduced the previous decision to derecognize SADR to an interruption of diplomatic relations, Sahrawi diplomats considered the move a restoration of diplomatic relations with the Sahrawi Republic.

In Kosovo’s case, a dozen countries announced by Serbia as withdrawing recognition of Kosovo re-established diplomatic contacts with it and implicitly continued their bilateral ties, which can be seen as restoring the original recognition. An instance is Guinea-Bissau, which originally recognized Kosovo in 2011 but announced in 2017 that it had withdrawn recognition. However, with the lobbying support of the United States, the president of Guinea-Bissau reversed the decision to rescind the recognition of Kosovo. As part of the restoration of recognition, a delegation from Guinea-Bissau attended the celebration of Kosovo’s tenth anniversary of independence in Prishtina. Soon after, in June 2018, Kosovo’s ambassador in

Senegal was accredited as the nonresident ambassador to Guinea-Bissau for the first time. On 28 July 2021, Kosovo's foreign minister, Donika Gërvalla, held a virtual meeting with her homologue from Guinea-Bissau, Suzi Carla Barbosa. A statement issued by the MFA of Kosovo stated that the two foreign Page 111 → ministers "discussed opportunities for bilateral cooperation with the aim of creating bilateral relations in the spheres of common interest." They highlighted cultural and economic cooperation. Although Suriname withdrew the recognition of Kosovo in 2017 and voted against its consideration for membership in Interpol in 2018, Kosovo's foreign minister met with Suriname's homologue on the margins of the Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles in June 2022, showing that both sides agreed to enhance cooperation. In the case of Dominica, Kosovo tried to formalize the establishment of diplomatic relations in an effort to overcome uncertainty over the alleged derecognition, whereas in the case of Palau and Grenada, high-level bilateral meetings and visits were used as evidence of stable bilateral relations (Office of the Prime Minister of Grenada 2023).

Diplomatic relations after derecognition continue in a somewhat ambiguous format, driven mainly by interpersonal relations between diplomats of derecognizing and derecognized countries. For example, Kosovo diplomats stationed in Japan continued holding public and bilateral meetings with Palau diplomats in Japan even after derecognition. An example is the April 2021 visit of the ambassador of the Republic of Palau to Japan, Francis Mariur Matsutaro, to the Embassy of Kosovo in Tokyo, where it was reported in social media that "the meeting was a good opportunity to discuss the excellent bilateral relations between our two countries, Palau and Kosovo." The Embassy of Kosovo in Japan (2021) publicly shared the news

on Facebook. It highlighted that the diplomats discussed “the need to have a non-resident ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo in Palau in the near future” and the “need to continue the close and friendly cooperation between the two embassies.” Kosovo has also arranged meetings with Papua New Guinea, Dominica, and Grenada for the 2022 UN General Assembly annual session. Examples such as these highlight that formal derecognition and its aftermath aren’t the end of the story but only another stage in an ongoing struggle between contender states, which remains largely an open-ended process until a final settlement centered on mutual recognition is achieved.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the process of state derecognition, looking at key stages, tactics, and outcomes. As the illustrative examples and evidence show, derecognition is present in world politics and has become a major diplomatic battlefield for contender states. While the act of derecognition is Page 112 →only a declaratory and textual endeavor, the fact that it implicates multiple states and touches various interests is actualized as a significant diplomatic encounter with potential and probable legal and political effects. Thus, what gives derecognition reality-making character is that it operates as an anti-diplomatic assemblage of multiple actors, tactics, and practices that occur in several stages and tend to produce not only microscaled effects but also much broader systemic effects. The diplomatic campaign of the former base state, blended with a strong diplomatic narrative and assisted by foreign allies, plays a significant role in identifying countries willing to trade their capacity to recognize or derecognize other states in exchange for economic and political goods. As shown in this chapter, contender states combine

various diplomatic tools and link their foreign policy of state derecognition with the specific context and needs of third countries to render them more receptive to the derecognition goal. The blended campaign for derecognition, in most cases, consists of using economic diplomacy (checkbook diplomacy), exploiting electoral cycles and government change in third countries, opening embassies in exchange for derecognition, using historical, societal, and ideological ties, and lobbying through powerful global/regional allies.

The diplomatic dynamics underpinning the derecognition of states are like the process of state recognition in the first instance, but in the reverse order. The process of recognition undergoes several stages, from estrangement and disengagement to acceptance, institutional engagement, and then formal recognition. In turn, derecognition as a process can take multiple shapes, such as retaining formal recognition but suspending institutional engagement or freezing recognition and taking a neutral stance pending a settlement between contender states. Jointly, these variants reveal a multiplicity of diplomatic relations that countries can maintain, ranging from full and solid diplomatic relations to disengaged relations and formal withdrawal of recognition. They show that countries can and do have diplomatic contacts and interact with one another regardless of the formal diplomatic status of their relations, whether they do or do not recognize one another on paper. In this sense, static and dogmatic views of recognition, nonrecognition, and derecognition do not correspond with real-world developments. Even with such a multiplicity of diplomatic relations, as much as it enables all protagonist states to count their international allies, this diplomatic ambivalence does not contribute to stable and predictable bilateral relations.

Ultimately, what gives global relevance to the struggle for recognition and derecognition is the buy-in of third countries who add weight and significance to this controversial practice. By tracing the process of state derecognition, Page 113 → the chapter exposed the category of states that were more willing to engage in trading recognition or derecognition in exchange for political, security, and material goods. Most countries implicated in the derecognition of other states are newly established as part of the decolonization process. They lack political stability, diplomatic tradition, and economic prosperity. These states, located in Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific region, have histories of shifting diplomatic allegiances to different dominant global powers. Because they are members of the UN, are universally recognized, and thus are expected to adhere to international norms and laws, they tend to exploit normative gray zones surrounding foreign policy conduct and state recognition to secure foreign aid, military support, and recognition of their government and their rulings. For these states, reconsidering the recognition of the claimant state or engaging in various in-between and hybrid forms of weakening, discontinuing, and breaking diplomatic relations appears to be normal and acceptable foreign policy. Since there are no organized and widely present instances of Western states engaging in derecognition games, derecognition is more of a characteristic of non-Western diplomatic culture. This indicates that the irreversibility of state recognition is more of a feature of Western diplomatic systems and cultures of interstate relations than a universal feature endorsed and practiced worldwide.

Thus, recognition and derecognition are not governed by rules, norms, and principles but are a by-product of regional diplomatic cultures and practices and the interests they nest and entangle. As the discussion in this chapter has shown, incremental downgrading, suspension, and withdrawal of recognition is an optimal solution for derecognizing states to balance competing pressures, enhance bargaining powers, and mitigate adverse effects. By reconsidering and withdrawing recognition incrementally, third states can retain some autonomy in running their foreign affairs and reduce domestic and international criticism of diplomatic overtures. It leaves the door open for restoring diplomatic ties with the claimant state and starting another round of bargaining with the competing states for recognition. Moreover, cases of derecognition guided by geopolitical and economic incentives are more likely to lead to full withdrawal of derecognition. In contrast, those driven by normative considerations are more likely to lead to freezing recognition and suspending official diplomatic ties. So the stronger the interests and higher the reward for derecognizing states, the clearer and more complete the derecognition variant. Therefore, it is essential to explore further the link between the variant or scale of severance of diplomatic relations and the rationale and justifications stimulating state derecognition.