

## **Narratives of Nationhood: The Struggle for Separatism in Asia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how states across the continent of Asia have reacted to separatist movements, with a focus on the case studies of Taiwan, Khalistan and Kashmir. This is illustrated through the multilateral and unilateral strategies that have been implemented and the international relations theory of constructivism exposes the undercurrents of these actions. Unilateral responses such as military interventions, sanctions and censorship reflect a state's desire to preserve its territorial integrity and suppress dissent amongst the population. More expansively, multilateral responses, ranging from symbolic support from intergovernmental organizations to selective foreign state investment, reveal the shocking ambivalence of the global community towards self-determination. Constructivism posits that these responses are shaped by socially constructed identities, the domineering narratives and of course, historical context. This explains why Taiwan garners more support than Kashmir or Khalistan, as its alignment with democratic global discourses is advantageous in the current political climate. The paper expresses that success of separatist movements is not solely reliant on legitimacy or morality, but rather how effectively they can mirror the prevailing international norms. In sum, this study highlights that sovereignty and legitimacy are ever evolving and global recognition of separatist aspirations is deeply influenced by the stories that domestic and international actors choose to tell and believe.

### **Keywords:**

Separatism, Constructivism, International Relations, Ethnic Nationalism

Separatist sentiment is often seen as a sign of a free-thinking society, but the road to statehood normally involves an uphill battle against powerful opponents. Secessionist movements in Asia, such as the contested entities of Taiwan, Khalistan, and Kashmir, challenge the concepts of national identity, territorial recognition, and sovereignty. Given these complexities, how have countries unilaterally and multilaterally responded to separatist movements in Asia, and how does constructivism explain these responses? These movements disrupt state borders and international norms, prompting unilateral responses in the form of military suppression, censorship, economic sanctions, and political/legal restrictions. At the same time, multilateral engagement involves diplomacy, mediation, and recognition or suppression of separatist claims. Additionally, constructivism illuminates that state responses are shaped not only by strategic pragmatism toward preserving statehood but also by identities and social contexts constructed on an “intermestic” basis (Boyer et al., 2019). This paper will show that while unilateral responses are rooted in sovereignty and national unity, multilateral engagement reflects global discourses on self-determination, legitimacy, and political ideologies. These responses are driven not just by material power and security but by constructed identities, historical narratives, and international norms. The paper first examines the framework of separatism and then analyzes unilateral and multilateral responses before applying a constructivist perspective to explain these dynamics.

*Separatism* in this context refers to political movements that advocate for complete autonomy for a specific group, often defined by their ethnic, religious, or territorial commonalities. The emergence of such movements is attributed to the desire for more control over a given group’s cultural, political, and economic affairs (Gupta, 2022). At its core, separatism is rooted in self-determination, as groups seek the right to exercise independent

governance. This desire originates in historical grievances, as the implications of colonization, imposed borders, forced assimilation, and discriminatory practices remain pervasive to this day. For instance, ethnic or religious groups may seek separatism to preserve their heritage and security, while economic exploitation of resource-rich regions fuels civil unrest. Beyond that, nationalism strengthens separatist claims by fostering a national identity distinct from the dominant state narrative. Some movements seek complete independence, while others merely push for autonomy within the existing framework. The methodology also varies with the utilization of anything from diplomacy to armed resistance. However, international recognition is the decisive factor for success, because a movement's resilience is determined largely by its perceived global legitimacy. Ultimately, these movements challenge the delicate balance between state sovereignty and the people's right to self-determination.

*Unilateral responses* refers to states' independent reactions to critical issues. Unilateral suppression of these movements prevents external interference in domestic affairs but damages a state's legitimacy and soft power if it contradicts international consensus (Thompson, 2009, p. 35). These responses to separatism most notably manifest as military intervention. India's Operation Blue Star (1984) is a prime example, as armed forces targeted Khalistani separatists in the Golden Temple, resulting in mass civilian casualties, religious desecration, and the martyrdom of key leaders (Bhardwaj & Wolpert, 2024). The martyrs, including but not limited to Sant Baba Jarnail Singh Ji, Bhai Amrik Singh Ji, General Subeg Singh, and Baba Tara Singh Ji, are esteemed heroes of the Sikh community who cemented the necessity of secession from a genocidal regime. Police forces continued this suppression of Sikhs, with reports of arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial executions persisting beyond the mid-1990s (Amnesty International, 2003). Similarly, India has made Kashmir the most densely militarized zone in the

world, consistently deploying significant numbers of troops to the region for decades, and particularly since the removal of Kashmir's special autonomous status in 2019 ("Kashmir, world's most militarized zone," 2023). China mirrors this pattern vis-à-vis Taiwan by using large-scale border drills and regular incursions into Taiwanese airspace (Maizland & Fong, 2025). These actions illustrate that armed force, far from a temporary measure, is in fact part of a broader pattern aimed at embedding security forces in contested regions and preventing insurgencies.

Furthermore, states respond unilaterally through political, legal, and economic sanctions. For example, India revoked Kashmir's special status in 2019, which stripped the territory of its constitutional autonomy and control over its land ("Kashmir, world's most militarized zone," 2023). This revocation highlighted India's power to politically and legally suppress separatist governance. Similarly, China enforces its One China policy to isolate Taiwan diplomatically by pressuring nations like Honduras in 2023 to sever ties with Taipei (Maizland & Fong, 2025). By limiting Taiwan's international recognition, China curtails its ability to gain momentum on the global stage. China also blocks Taiwan from trade agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, thus limiting its economic viability (Maizland & Fong, 2025). Moreover, censorship plays a significant role in unilateral suppression. In Punjab, India ordered an Internet shutdown from 18 to 24 March 2023, coinciding the pursuit of separatist leader Amritpal Singh, citing vague threats to public safety (Panjiar & Waghre, 2023). A similar instance occurred in Kashmir when India cut off access to the Internet for over five hundred days beginning in 2019 (Bajoria, 2023). These blackouts reinforced state control by suppressing the spread of separatist narratives and restricting mobilization. These unilateral responses do suppress separatist

movements in the short term; however, the ramifications of these restrictions and human rights violations often lead to further radicalization, prolonged conflict, and greater international scrutiny. It is important to recognize that these patterns reveal that states are not only concerned with national security. Ultimately, the goal is to deoxygenate separatist flames before they can gain legitimacy and external support.

Multilateral responses to separatist movements involve international organizations and foreign state intervention, balancing sovereignty and self-determination. While the United Nations advocates for self-determination, enforcement remains weak. Meanwhile, states engage in separatist conflicts selectively, based on strategic interests rather than moral considerations.

The UN plays a central role in separatist conflicts, with article 1 of the UN Charter serving as the foundational source for self-determination (United Nations, 1945). However, while UN Security Council Resolution 47 (1948) called for a plebiscite in Kashmir, India has yet to conduct such a vote (United Nations Security Council, 1948). Similarly, Taiwan's 2007 UN membership bid was rejected, and China continues to block its participation in organizations like the World Health Organization ("UN rejects Taiwan," 2007; Chen & Cohen, 2020). The UN also remains uninvolved in the Khalistan movement despite Sikhs for Justice holding global referendums on Punjab's independence. Lastly, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a regional intergovernmental organization (IGO), has condemned India's policies in Kashmir, though India rejects this as foreign interference (OIC, 2023). All of these instances serve as a reminder of the limitations of international organizations' power.

In terms of the pattern of state responses internationally, the Khalistan movement has led to diplomatic tensions between India and the West. In Canada, the 2023 assassination of pro-Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar led Justin Trudeau to accuse India of violating Canadian

sovereignty. This resulted in reciprocal diplomatic expulsions (Tasker, 2023). The same year, the United States charged an Indian intelligence officer in connection to an assassination plot targeting the founder of Sikhs for Justice, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun (Lucas, 2024). While Khalistan still lacks official recognition, global awareness and condemnation of India's intra- and extraterritorial operations have increased.

Taiwan's fight to maintain its independence remains one of the most contested movements due to China's influence globally. However, the United States remains Taiwan's most potent ally as it supplies arms under the Taiwan Relations Act while maintaining its own One China policy (Maizland & Fong, 2025). Similarly, due to Japan's close cultural ties with Taiwan, it provides strong support through trade, disaster aid, and defence diplomacy (Rickards, 2024). The European Union has also increased its engagement with Taiwan, with Lithuania recognizing Taiwan and opening an unofficial diplomatic office despite Chinese retaliation (Shattuck, 2023). These are all great strides toward maintaining Taiwan's sovereignty, even if China's geopolitical influence still ultimately prevails.

Crucially, self-determination for Kashmir has been historically supported by the UN, but the gesture remains symbolic due to India's refusal to comply (United Nations Security Council, 1948). Pakistan continues to strongly advocate for Kashmiri separatism (Latif, 2025). This support is driven by Islamic commonality and its rivalry with India. However, China, once a supporter of Kashmir's accession to Pakistan, has shifted to a more neutral stance in an attempt to promote regional stability by managing Indo-Pakistani tensions with the United States. As a result, Kashmir's struggle for self-determination, which began in the twentieth century, remains stalled due to shifting global priorities.

In conclusion, multilateral responses to separatism range from symbolic IGO support to patterns of foreign state responses. Western states opt to support the separatist movements without jeopardizing relations with the existing states. North American states, for instance, tend to engage when secessionist conflicts affect diaspora communities or state security. Similarly, China and Pakistan selectively support the movements and prioritize geopolitical interests over ideological consistency. Meanwhile, IGOs like the UN and the OIC lack enforcement power and are limited by international anarchy. What is important to note is that a movement's success depends on its international leverage. This is why Taiwan, with its more significant economic and political influence, receives more support than Kashmir and Khalistan.

Constructivism provides an alternative perspective in international relations theory by emphasizing that state interests are socially constructed through ideas, identities, and norms. Conventional constructivism focuses on how interests emerge through interactions, while critical constructivism questions dominant narratives and norms (Hopf, 1998). Constructivists argue that anarchy is not innately driven by self-help and power politics. Instead, international dynamics are constructed through the state's interactions and shared understandings (Wendt, 1992). Accordingly, state interests can evolve within the global framework, mainly through international organizations that promote new norms and redefine national goals (Finnemore, 1996). Institutions like UNESCO and the Red Cross redefine how states perceive issues like war and science. Interestingly, power in constructivism extends beyond military or economic strength. Since knowledge is socially constructed, those in control of the dominant narrative determine what is "true" in global politics (Guzzini, 2000). Unlike the rigidity of realism or liberalism, constructivism explains global politics by examining underlying factors that inform geopolitical currents.

Constructivism reveals that state responses to separatism cannot be written off as fixed geopolitical realities, as socially constructed identities, historical narratives, and dominant norms provide more insight. Taiwan, for example, remains isolated because China has successfully framed it as an inalienable part of its national identity. By perpetuating the “One China” narrative through the vast reach of its institutions, China manages to paint the continuation of Taiwanese independence as unrealistic. Equally revealing is India’s portrayal of the Khalistan separatist movement. Historically, Sikhs have been a bastion of the wider nation’s traditions of freedom-fighting, activism, and strength. Additionally, the territory of Punjab, with its water supply and its surplus of wheat and rice production, is resource-abundant. As a response, a combination of India’s exploitative relationship with Punjab and the rise of Hindu nationalism resulting in anti-Sikh rhetoric plays a key role in the suppression of the religious minority. Internationally, India’s ability to effectively draw a parallel between Khalistani separatism and terrorism discourages multilateral recognition and delegitimizes the movement. In the case of Kashmir, India emphasizes the danger of external interference from Pakistan and the OIC to its territorial legitimacy. By reframing the movement as an internal matter, India can justify its military occupation and curtail any global intervention. Subsequently, constructivism also explains why international responses vary. Support for separatist movements is not based on the universal principle of self-determination, but rather on an alignment with prevailing norms. Therefore, Taiwan garners more support than Kashmir and Khalistan because its democratic governance and opposition to communism fits within dominant global frameworks. Meanwhile, separatist struggles that have religious or ethnic identities experience diplomatic inactivity, as seen in the cases of Khalistan and Kashmir. These observations underscore that legitimacy is



neither inherent nor guaranteed. Hence, movements that embed their narratives into the dominant global discourse gain traction, while those seen as threats to the status quo are sidelined.

All in all, state responses to separatism in Asia are shaped by security, sovereignty, and legitimacy. Unilateral actions like military suppression and political, economic, and legal restrictions serve to maintain national unity, as seen in India's suppression in Punjab and Kashmir, as well as China's stance on Taiwan. Furthermore, multilateral responses depend on how the movement's approach to self-determination aligns with global politics and legitimacy. This is exemplified by the level of support for Taiwan due to its democratic identity, the rise of support for Khalistan due to extraterritorial infractions by India, and the fluctuation of support for Kashmir according to geopolitical trends. Notably, constructivism highlights that the fate of separatist movements is defined not only by conflict or diplomacy but also by the stories the world chooses to believe. In summary, as the global sphere evolves, perhaps with it will come a wave of recognition for those yearning for sovereignty.

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