

# Can a World State Remove the Threat of Nuclear Annihilation? The Problem of Successionism

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(A Comment on Cabrera's 'On World Government: Security, Democracy, Justice') [1]

In his book preview 'On World Government: Security, Democracy, Justice' Luis Cabrera (2015) identifies two problems, that of secessionism and of collective action, facing a world state constructed primarily as the most effective instrument for the removal of the threat of global annihilation through nuclear war. We shall here discuss only the first problem; the following is Cabrera's own account of it:

"The cure (paradoxically) may well be worse than the disease. Relatively rapid integration intended to secure individuals against violent death through nuclear weapons could also lead to endemic secessionist and related conflict, imperilling many who had been relatively secure" (Cabrera 2015, 4-5)

The institution(s) which were to bring security from nuclear annihilation *could* also bring insecurity from secessionist war or conflict. Cabrera does not claim that such global institutions would, by their nature or function, bring such insecurity yet he argues that

"...it would seem likely that internal secession pressures, or possibly tendencies for sub-global governing units to defect from nuclear control agreements, could lead to very similar tendencies toward concentrated hierarchy from global-level governing organs. That would seem particularly likely, again, in the case of any relatively rapidly constructed global institutions whose primary aim would be to control security threats" (5).

In addition to the above claim about *possible* insecurity, Cabrera further outlines the conditions under which such insecurity is *likely* to arise. When the global institutions aiming at the removal of insecurity arising from possible nuclear annihilation are '*relatively rapidly constructed*,' these very institutions are *likely* to bring about insecurity which arises from secessionist pressures and from their likely repressive response to these pressures.

Since his argument (in a book preview) is not developed in further detail, we shall not discuss it any further. Instead, I shall examine four types of responses to the problem of secessionism

advanced by advocates of a world state or of a global nuclear restraint association. These four types of response could be roughly labelled as: *allowing secession*, (morally) *'trumping' secession*, *detering secession*, and *criminalizing secession*. These four types of response show that at least some advocates of a world state or global anti-nuclear institutions address the problem of secession and attempt to avoid a possible or likely increase in insecurity that secession from a world state may or would bring about.

### *Allowing secession*

The first type of response is to make secession from the world state free, legal and achievable by peaceful means. James A. Yunker (2014, vii, 85; 1999 149, 157) argues that each member unit (nation-state) of his proposed Federal Union of Democratic Nations would retain the right to secede from the Federal Union and would also retain its own military forces, including nuclear weapons (2014, 9). The Federal Union would establish grounds for cooperation and trust which, Yunker argues elsewhere, might eventually lead, in the future, to a '...a condition ...under which a nuclear world war would be virtually unimaginable' (Yunker 2014, xi). In any case, his Federal Union would not necessarily be armed with nuclear weapons and would not use its military forces against any secession attempts from the Union. Yunker believes that present-day secession conflicts arise from 'internal ethnic and ideological conflicts' (Yunker 2009, 157) in which the Federal Union should not intervene militarily at least not in the period of 30 to 40 years after its founding. Such military interventions would, according to Yunker, threaten the stability of the Union; however, once stability is achieved, the Union may militarily intervene in armed conflicts for humanitarian reasons, that is, to save the lives of its inhabitants (2009, 157). Yunker does not envisage the possibility, even in a distant future, of an internal armed conflict *within* a member state between the adherents of the Federal Union and the advocates of secession *from* the Federal Union. But if we envisage such an internal armed conflict in a situation in which the Federal Union is stable and fully functioning, we can also envisage the Federal Union intervening in the conflict by military force on humanitarian grounds, to save the lives of its citizens. But what would happen if the secessionists, the opponents of the Federal Union, were to oppose, by force, such an intervention? Would the Federal Union wage war against its secessionist citizens and suppress their attempt of secession – or would it simply abstain from intervention and let the two groups fight it out among themselves regardless of the cost in human lives? It may not be possible for us to give a definitive answer to this question. But this imaginary scenario shows that Yunker's Federal Union may, under some circumstances, use its military force to suppress secession attempts in order to stop or prevent armed conflict and thus ensure security of its inhabitants.

Yunker's Federal Union is not constructed so as to enhance, radically and rapidly, the security of individuals within the Union; it aims to increase cooperation and economic parity among member states and their citizens and in this way to enhance their security. A free and peaceful secession from the Federal Union should not, by itself, lead to any threats to security of its inhabitants; by allowing peaceful secession, Yunker's project appears to avoid the problem of secession arising from the world state's repressive response to secession and the consequent increase in insecurity. In short, his project does not aim at a rapid 'cure' (of the 'nuclear annihilation disease') and it rules out a repressive response to secession from his world state;

hence, his world state (a long term ‘cure’) is not likely to increase the insecurity of its inhabitants by such a repressive response.

### *‘Trumping’ secession*

Etzioni proposes a specialized Global Safety Authority, modelled on state law enforcement agencies, with global authority and jurisdiction (Etzioni 2004, 103-25). Unlike Yunker’s Federal Union of Democratic Nations, the principal aim of the Global Safety Authority is to enhance, rapidly if not radically, the security of individuals, in particular in those states which are threatened by possible nuclear attacks and by terrorism. But the aims of this Authority significantly curtail the ‘national sovereignty’ of most existing states as well as of national groups aiming at statehood. Instead of ‘secession’ Etzioni uses the term ‘independence’ and advocates the selective *suppression of secession/independence* movements or aspirations and of the national sovereignty of existing states. The principal justification for this is the threat of terrorist or rogue states’ use of Weapons of Mass Destruction, including nuclear weapons: this threat, he asserts, ‘trumps the respect of national sovereignty’ (Etzioni 2004, 138). His project for a Global Safety Authority ‘will draw on replacing respect for national sovereignty with a growing respect for a human good—the right to live, whatever one’s nationality’ (Etzioni 2004, 139). In short, he ranks the individual right to live higher in value than national sovereignty – and thus the protection of the former right ‘trumps’ national sovereignty in every situation in which the former is under a *possible* threat (e.g. by a possible nuclear attack).

Etzioni does not address the problem of secession from his Global Safety Authority; but he allows the Authority to use lethal force and to kill people in order to destroy the nuclear weapons of those states which refuse to submit to its program of nuclear deproliferation (on pragmatic grounds Russia and the USA – and possibly some other powerful states - are exempt from the use of force to achieve nuclear disarmament, Etzioni 2004, 125). By analogy, the use of lethal force would be allowed to prevent secession of a (relatively weak) state from the Global Safety Authority. Since on his ranking national sovereignty is lower in value than the right to live, the use of force against the national sovereignty of states is justified, provided that the right to live of the *majority* of mankind is not thereby threatened. The right to live of some people – those living in the secessionist state – can be thus breached for the sake of protecting the right to live of the majority.

If this is so, Etzioni’s apparent response to the problem of secessionism would be to deny its existence: within his project, morally justified suppression of secession by lethal force decreases the security of only some while increasing the security of most. The ‘cure’ is here assumed to be better than the disease because the cure – Global Safety Authority’s suppression of secession – does not threaten the security of the majority. But what if the suppression of secession from the Global Safety Authority leads to a nuclear exchange and thus threatens the lives of the majority? This is after all the first point that Cabrera raises – that the cure *may* be worse than the disease. Even if a secession from the Global Safety Authority, as an assertion of national sovereignty, is morally wrong (as Etzioni believes), its (morally right?) suppression by lethal force still may prove (morally?) worse for everyone: its moral ‘trumping’ does not seem to be capable of preventing such an outcome. [2]

## *Detering secession*

Instead of a state or state-like authority, Jonathan Schell (1984, 115-23) proposes an agreement of all states which abolishes nuclear weapons but retains (a) anti-nuclear defensive weaponry and (b) the capacity to build and deliver nuclear weapons in an agreed short period of time. This capacity to build on short notice is to be inspected and monitored (Schell 1984, 118 – by an international team or agency?). A ‘secession’ from this agreement would be ‘blatant, open violation of the agreement by a powerful and ruthless nation... by suddenly and swiftly building up, and perhaps actually using, an overwhelming nuclear arsenal’ (117). This would trigger a similar nuclear build-up in other states and restore ‘something like the balance of terror as we know it today’ (118). This build-up of nuclear weapons plus the existing anti-nuclear weaponry would deny any military advantage to the secessionist state (‘nation’) and thus deter its leaders from using nuclear weapons.

In short, Schell’s response to the problem of secession is deterrence: the threat to effectively nullify any military advantage of nuclear rearmament by a seceding state. Schell envisages not the use of lethal force to stop or prevent secession, but only rearmament, which makes such a secession ineffective from a military point of view. It responds to the threat by a similar threat aiming to nullify the former.

Schell’s concept of ‘recessed deterrence,’ outlined above, is incorporated as one of the three components of Daniel Deudney’s project of federal republican nuclear one worldism, which aims to remove the threat of nuclear devastation through non-hierarchical or diffuse global institutional arrangements (Deudney 2007, 255-64).

One could now argue that nuclear rearmament and the threat of the use of nuclear weapons in response to a secession increases the insecurity of all and, therefore, deterrence of this kind is worse than the disease it aims to cure. If so, deterrence does not solve the problem of secessionism as identified by Cabrera. But it is not the rearmament that initially increases insecurity but the secession of a state from the nuclear weapons abolition agreement regime. The abolition agreement does not put involuntary constraints on the ‘national sovereignty’ of the states – all states enter the agreement voluntarily for the sake of increasing their own security and that of the others. Thus the abolition agreement does not introduce any pressures or constraints to which states need to (or should) respond by secession. [3] In voluntarily seceding from the agreement, a state thereby chooses to increase its own insecurity and that of others – and Shell believes that no agreement nor overwhelming military power can stop a state (that is, its leaders) from making the *choice* to increase its own insecurity. If a person chooses to increase one’s own insecurity by threatening or attacking others, it may be difficult to stop that person from choosing this: one can try to reason or to flatter or to suggest a therapy. These strategies are severely curtailed in the case of states (although one can still try them): the option that is not curtailed in inter-state relations is that of a threat in response to a threat.

The above argument loses some of its plausibility in a situation in which the seceding state believes it is forced to secede and to re-build and use nuclear weapons because it is facing an imminent defeat and occupation in a conventional war. In such a case, the state decides to secede under duress – of imminent defeat and occupation. Threatening that state with the use of nuclear

weapons against it may not work as an effective deterrence: in such a situation, the state under threat may still use nuclear weapons against its enemy to prevent its own defeat and occupation. As its use of nuclear weapons is directed only against the military/nuclear assets of a single enemy state, it does not necessarily lead to the nuclear annihilation of the world nor even a limited nuclear exchange among major powers. One can envisage a self-defense situation of this kind in which, say, Israeli leaders may be ready to use nuclear weapons against one or more of Israel's military opponents. The use of nuclear weapons for such limited purpose does not necessarily lead to the nuclear annihilation of humankind but greatly increases the risk of this scenario occurring and thus increases the insecurity of all (as well as leading to the death of a great number of non-combatants from states not engaged in the conflict).

The need for nuclear self-defense as a prevention of a (perceived) greater evil indicates that increasing the insecurity of all – by increasing the risk (but not causing) wholesale nuclear annihilation – may be a rational option for a state and not only an undesirable consequence of secession from the world state. Neither Schell's nor Deudney's project can remove the threat of defeat and occupation in a conventional war and thus their projects cannot remove this incentive to secede from global anti-nuclear institutions and to use nuclear weapons to counter such a threat. To resolve the problem of secessionism one would need to remove at least this particular incentive of nuclear self-defense in response to a (perceived) greater evil. This is what Wendt's (2003) project of the world state may be attempting to achieve.

### *Criminalizing secession*

Wendt's world state is premised on the existence of a 'We' identity among all citizens of the world whose (other) individual and national identities are at the same time fully recognized by the world state. Recognition of a national identity would not, however, involve the recognition of the right to use organized violence (wage war) against people of different national identity; Wendt's world state recognizes national identity without recognizing sovereignty of this kind. Wendt assumes that secession from a world state would constitute an attempt to recover sovereignty for one territorial group, that is, the right to wage war, against other groups. Any such attempt would constitute a crime (Wendt 2003, 527) which the world state would have a capacity to suppress and punish by using its own military/police force or sub-contracted national armies (Wendt 2003, 506). As a punishable crime, secession is a temporary disruption of order and not a return to anarchy or possibility of large-scale warfare among states, including nuclear warfare. By labelling secession a crime, one is here indicating that its punishment by force is far less threatening to the security of all citizens than the possibility of large-scale warfare. Is this a solution to the problem of secessionism?

Wendt admits that the world state's ability to prevent secession brings only 'temporary security' to the world state (Wendt 2003, 525): the enforcement of the world state's law against secession does not appear to provide durable security. Does the 'We' identity of all citizens remove all incentives to secede? If all citizens feel that they are members of a community which fully recognizes their national and all other identities, they would be less inclined to regard any group as hostile or as aggressors. Since we would all be members of one community, there are no national enemies or aggressors in such a community against whom one needs to resort to

national self-defence – and hence there are no reasons (nor incentives) to secede from the world state to fight (non-existent) enemies.

According to Wendt, a future world state would have no option but to ‘embrace nationalism’ [4] meaning to recognize all claims to nationhood and not to discriminate against any group claiming it. But nationalism demands national self-determination – and, by definition, this means an unrestricted right to determine the scope and extent of a nation’s self-government. Wendt’s world state (unlike Yunker’s) cannot ‘embrace’ this kind of unrestricted right: permissible nationalism is here nationalism without national self-determination and without national self-defence (although he allows for national armies, perhaps to be used only as sub-contractors for the world state? cf. Wendt 2003, 506).

However, armed conflict among groups within a world state can arise even if all of its citizens share a ‘We’ identity at least under the following circumstances: first, groups within the world state may develop deep ‘non-national’ differences/disagreements in their worldviews, for example, regarding life choices – whether to keep people alive on life-machines or not; second, if these disagreements impede the functioning (e.g. revenue collection) of the world state, the latter may be forced to use its police/military forces against that group which appears most threatening to its functioning. [5] Under these conditions, the attacked group may respond by force – thus precipitating an armed secession from the world state. Even if all citizens shared, at least initially, a common cosmopolitan ‘We’ identity, criminalizing the secession of a group that is defending itself from attack neither prevents nor stops this secession. It seems that common cosmopolitan identity plus law enforcement cannot do much more here than Etzioni’s simple moral code or normative ranking could.

### *Concluding remarks*

Our review of four attempts to solve the problem of secessionism suggests two alternative approaches to the problem: either one attempts to contain secessionism by e.g. deterrence and/or criminalization so as to minimize its threat to the security of the majority of humankind, or one avoids the use of force in countering secessionism and thus removes its potential threat to security. As we have seen, the first approach does not appear to solve the problem although it possibly reduces the extent to which secessionism may present a threat to the security of all. By containing secessionism, one tries to ensure that secessionism does not ‘spill over’ and threaten the security of the majority of humankind. In this way, one is attempting to make the cure (global institutions) less harmful – at least in their scope and extent – than the disease, the threat of nuclear annihilation.

The second approach, pursued by Yunker, requires that a world state restricts its role as a provider of security. Secession from a world state, under this restricted regime, is not a threat to security and does not require a response by force. [6] This approach solves the problem by abandoning the initial assumption that a world state will, from its very start, provide better security to its citizens than its members, nation-states, can provide. In other words, it abandons the assumption that a world state is, *ab initio*, a superior cure to the disease of the risk of nuclear annihilation. Nation-states remain, according to this approach, the principal providers of security and since a number of them possess powerful nuclear weapons, humankind continues to be

exposed to the threat of total annihilation (which, of course, can be reduced and in the long term perhaps eliminated altogether). The second approach acknowledges the existence of the threat, upholds a hope for its future removal to be facilitated (in some way) by a world state (or something like it) but makes no provision for a rapid institutionally-based removal of this threat. In other words, the advocates of the second approach do not consider this threat a matter in need of an urgent removal by means of global institutional arrangements.

As Yunker points out, humankind seems to have got used to living with such an enormous threat to its security and existence, possibly through an unconscious denial of its existence. [7] Under these circumstances, one can understand why there is no sense of urgency necessitating the establishment of a global institution capable of removing such a threat. Nevertheless, a few influential leaders and officials in the USA and Russia have only recently attempted to initiate a process of nuclear disarmament which would reduce and possibly remove the threat; so far their efforts have come to nought, possibly confirming Yunker's ironic diagnosis (*The Economist* 2015). [8]

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[1] I would like to thank Luis Cabrera for his generous comments on an earlier draft of this paper and my son Andrej for editing the final version.

[2] It is not clear that Etzioni's normative ranking of national sovereignty as lower than the general right to live, can in fact justify the *actual* use of lethal force (killing people) for the sake of removing a *possible* threat to the general right to live (that is, for the sake of preventing *possible* large-scale nuclear exchange). In general, it is difficult (if not impossible) to morally justify inflicting *actual* irreparable harm (death) by reference to its removal of *possible* irreparable harm.

[3] This is a possible reply to Cabrera's initial claim that 'relatively rapidly constructed' global institutions are likely to increase pressure to secede from the world state (see the second quote on page 1). But is Schell's voluntary agreement an 'institution' comparable to Yunker's Federal Union of Democratic States or Etzioni's Global Safety Authority? I shall not attempt to answer the question here.

[4] 'Far from suppressing nationalism, a world state will only be possible if it embraces it' (Wendt 2003, 527)

[5] Such a scenario and its consequences are outlined in Pavković 2010.

[6] In Cabrera's outline of the development of world government institutions, the latter, at least in their initial stages, do not aim to provide security for individuals and hence do not command armed force; the level of integration in the early stage of development is so low that the question of secession from those institutions does not arise – and in any case, in the absence of armed forces, these institutions, in these early stages, are not in a position to use force against any attempt at secession (Cabrera 2015, 13-4). This is different from Yunker's project where the world state would initially possess an armed force which it would *not* be authorized to use against any attempt at secession.

[7] 'When reality is too terrible to contemplate, deny reality' (Yunker 2014, 3).

[8] The *Economist* notes that in the past few decades the risk of nuclear annihilation has in fact increased (with a further proliferation of nuclear weapons and potential access them) but it proposes no new global institutions to deal with or remove the risk. Instead, this weekly holds that (1) restoring 'effective deterrence,' (2) restricting or stopping proliferation and (3) resuming arms-control negotiations are at present 'the best that can be achieved' (Economist 2015, 21).