SUPERPOWER RESPONSIBILITY FOR
STATE RECOGNITION: CHARTING A
COURSE FOR NAGORNO-KARABAKH

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SUPERPOWER RESPONSIBILITY FOR STATE RECOGNITION:
CHARTING A COURSE FOR NAGORNO-KARABAKH

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“With great power comes great responsibility.”
- Peter Parker, Spiderman (2002)¹

“To recognize a community as a State is to declare that it fulfills the conditions of statehood as required by international law. If these conditions are present, existing States are under the duty to grant recognition.”
- Hersch Lauterpacht, Recognition of States in International Law²

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¹ This quote is also associated with Benjamin Parker, commonly referred to as Uncle Ben, who often lectured Peter. In fact, New York City mayor-elect Thomas Francis Gilroy used this phrase in an 1892 interview in which he was asked to comment on the recent Democratic victory. See “Tammany is Satisfied: Mr. Gilroy Interviewed at New Orleans,” The New York Times, November 15, 1892.

I. Introduction

Nations routinely refrain from intervening in one another’s domestic affairs out of mutual respect for territorial integrity and international comity. On this basis, the international community has since 1994 determined to not recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh region (NKR) as independent from the Republic of Azerbaijan, with the understanding that this view might change if an OSCE\(^3\)-sponsored negotiation effort determines that NKR should gain *de jure* independence rather than obtain a semi-autonomous status within Azerbaijan. By contrast, some of the world’s leading powers have quickly recognized or dismissed similar independence struggles, where doing so was guided by their own strategic interests\(^4\) without respect for fellow states’ territorial concerns.\(^5\) Among other reasons, Great Power favor has been curried due to humanitarian concerns that implicate a responsibility to protect with its commitments to prevent, react and re-build.\(^6\)

In any case, recent experience in other religion- and ethnicity-based conflicts suggests that a wait-and-see approach in NKR is more likely to exacerbate and

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\(^3\) The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Minsk Group was formed in 1992 and tasked with mediating peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the Nagorno-Karabakh War ended in 1994. The United States, Russia and France are current co-chairs.

\(^4\) One classic example is the case of Taiwan, which major world powers in the 1970s decided to de-recognize in favor of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s claims to territorial integrity. In spite of the PRC’s failure to exercise any control of Taiwan, the existing government of the Republic of China (ROC) has been denied diplomatic recognition by all but twenty-three nations. Background Note: Taiwan, United States Department of State, February 8, 2012. The PRC characterizes this situation as an “internal” issue within “One China.” See Pasha Hsieh, *An Unrecognized State in Foreign and International Courts: The Case of the Republic of China on Taiwan*, Michigan Journal of International Law, vol. 28, 765-814 (2007) (arguing that the ROC meets all four Montevideo Convention factors, discussed *infra* note 7, to make it a state, that various international courts recognize the ROC, and that therefore international law should govern relations between the ROC and PRC). By contrast, Israel was admitted to the United Nations even before it had full control over the region currently within its disputed borders in part out of concern for the mass settlement of Holocaust emigrées. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 273 (III) Admission of Israel to membership in the United Nations. Such premature recognition can potentially interfere with a state’s internal affairs. For example, the Arbitration Commission on Yugoslavia in 1992 found that Croatia met the necessary conditions for statehood; however, as it only controlled one-third of its claimed territory, some criticized Austria’s recognition of it. See Croatia – Opinion No. 5 (Croatia) of the Arbitration Commission on Yugoslavia.

\(^5\) The de-recognition of the ROC demonstrates a lack of respect for a hitherto fellow state’s interests, based on the potential for a stronger and more prosperous ally embodied by the PRC.

\(^6\) See the discussion at IV.C., *infra*. 
prolong regional tension and human suffering than to engender amity.\textsuperscript{7} Moreover, the precepts of the Montevideo Convention (MC) with regard to criteria for determining the existence of an independent state\textsuperscript{8} have become universally accepted and now form international law. In circumstances where there is some ambiguity regarding whether emerging states fall within the MC criteria, the leadership of the world’s superpowers (the “Great Powers” or “Superpowers”) in this regard is deemed dispositive.\textsuperscript{9} In practice, we find an established custom of the world community to engage with states that may or may not objectively meet MC’s defined legal criteria, but only if they are favored by the Great Powers politically.

Due to the influence of their decisions, such leading states can thus be said to have a heightened responsibility to facilitate conflict resolution and to elucidate acceptable objective criteria so that their determinations do not appear to be based only on self-interest or whim. In light of United Nations Security Council’s Article 41 and 42 resolutions’ binding effect, the permanent members of the Security Council –

\footnote{7} The Kashmir dispute is a prime example of this anticipated outcome. See Amit K. Chhabra, \textit{Breakthrough or Breakdown: U.S.-Pakistan Military Alliance of 1954}, Foreign Policy Journal (2011) (describing the inevitable continuance of the conflict as a reflection of Indian and Pakistani ideology and interests in maintaining territorial integrity, thereby leading to ever-increasing suspicion and animosity among Indians, Pakistanis and Kashmiris).

\footnote{8} These criteria include (1) a permanent population; (2) a defined territory; (3) a government; and (4) the capacity to enter into relations with other states. Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, Art. 1, Dec. 26, 1933. It has also been posited that an additional criterion - the moral opinion of the world community – has acted to bar recognition of such governments as Rhodesia and apartheid-based Bantustan governments established by South Africa to forcefully remove, divide and rule black people in an effort to eliminate them as a responsibility of South Africa. See S. F. Khunou, \textit{Traditional Leadership and Independent Bantustans of South Africa: Some Milestones of Transformative Constitutionalism Beyond Apartheid}, Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2009), 86.

\footnote{9} As discussed supra notes 4-5, the world’s leading powers gradually abandoned recognition of the ROC in Taiwan due to pressure from the PRC to choose it or the ROC for purposes of diplomatic relations; in effect, only twenty-three nations now officially recognize statehood for Taiwan. See Milena Sterio, \textit{On the Right to External Self-Determination: “Selfistsans,” Secession, and the Great Powers’ Rule}, Minnesota Journal of International Law, 19(1), 2010 (arguing that struggles for independence need to show that their peoples have been oppressed, that the central government is relatively weak, that it has been administered by an international organization, and most importantly that it has gained the support of the Great Powers). The support of the Great Powers – due to their heavy media involvement, ability to provide military aid, and Security Council influence - was able to ensure independence for the Kosovars and Timorese (both due to human rights violations and no “Great Power” in opposition) but denied it for Chechens (due to Russia’s opposition as a “Great Power”), South Ossetians and Abkhazians (both in part due to fears of Russian expansionism though in the face of strong separatist movements and human right violations). In this Article, I borrow Sterio’s and others’ term “Great Power.”
the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China and France – are members of this group along with other G-8 nations: Germany, Italy and Japan.\(^{10}\)

The purpose of this Article is to criticize the international community’s current wait-and-see approach with regard to NKR and OSCE talks, and to suggest an alternative by drawing on the lessons of historical recognition efforts and existing scholarship on NKR’s self-determination efforts.\(^{11}\) Rather than continue to hope for an OSCE outcome twenty years after talks began, the Great Powers have an independent responsibility to keep up the pressure by overseeing the transition unilaterally.\(^{12}\) Moreover, this responsibility requires that the Great Powers not base decisions solely upon their own geopolitical interests; instead, international customary law (ICL) and regional custom governing former Soviet states obligates them to abide by norms that might lead to outcomes counter to their own preferences. The failure of the international community to act when needed is a failure of the international system itself, and can have far-reaching repercussions.\(^{13}\) The Great Powers must

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10 Id., 154.

11 Substantial scholarship has already reviewed whether Nagorno-Karabaks have a right to self-determination, right of secession and whether existing concerns can be addressed by remaining within Azerbaijan as a semi-autonomous territory. See, e.g., The Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis: A Blueprint for Resolution, Public International Law & Policy Group and the New England Center for International Law & Policy, June 2000 (finding a right to self-determination based on objective and subjective criteria; extending it to a right of secession where the governing state is unrepresentative, has committed substantial human rights atrocities against it and even instituted an economic blockade, and where the seceding entity is already de facto independent; and applying MC’s traditional criteria for statehood to find that NKR is entitled to de jure state recognition). See also DerHartunian, Argam, Negotiation and Settlement in Nagorno-Karabak: Maintaining Territorial Integrity or Promoting Self-Determination?, Pepperdine Dispute Resolution Law Journal, 7(2), 318 (2007) (reviewing the historical interests of the parties and the failed negotiation efforts); and Gerard J. Libaridian, The Elusive ‘Right Formula’ at the ‘Right Time’: A Historical Analysis of the Official Peace Process in The Limits of Leadership: Elites and Societies in the Nagorny Karabakh Peace Process (Laurence Broers ed., 2005) (concluding that a solution depends on the degree of urgency felt by the parties to reach a solution; sufficient political capital held by their leaders to sell a compromise solution to publics used to hard-line rhetoric; and the combined and determined support of regional and international players to support such a solution).

12 By analogy, the Palestinian Authority’s frustration with ongoing peace negotiations led to a unilateral declaration of statehood. See Virginia Tilley, Bantustans and the Unilateral Declaration of Statehood, The Electronic Intifada (November 19, 2009) (arguing that a Palestinian state is a dead end that threatens to rob the Palestinian movement of its only remaining clout, and will result in a Palestine state wholly dependent for its survival on Israel).

13 For example, the international community was required by the League of Nations to act to stop Italy’s encroachment of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia); their failure to agree on action at that time in part led to the loss of millions of lives in the horrors of the Second World War. Covenant of the League of Nations, Article X.
therefore act when they have a duty - express or implied by their role in the international system - to do so.

After placing the NKR struggle in historical context, we review the value of diplomatic recognition and proceed to query whether international law and custom mandate such recognition if MC criteria have been satisfied. Next, do the Great Powers have an enhanced responsibility to unilaterally engage with NKR, in spite of the OSCE-led negotiation effort or any concerted action through the United Nations? The paper concludes that custom mandates Great Power diplomatic engagement with NKR – though not necessarily recognition – with the expectation that such direct engagement will lead to a relatively quick resolution. Specifically, a referendum will likely indicate popular preference for annexation by Armenia. The ultimate decision to recognize NKR – or not – continues to rest within the decision-making ambit of each individual Great Power that chooses to actively engage with NKR.

II. NAGORNO-KARABKH: BACKGROUND OF THE REGION AND CONFLICT

A. The Current Situation

The history of the NKR region has been dictated, in part, by its location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This has facilitated invasions by Arabs, Persians, Seljuk Turks, Mongol conquerors, and Turkish tribes. Nonetheless, the region has been widely recognized as comprising primarily an ethnic Armenian populace, speaking an Armenian dialect. Although the effects of the Armenian Genocide and other migrations have decreased the proportion of ethnic Armenians relative to Azerbaijanis, referenda in 1987 and 1991 indicated popular support for secession by the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) from the Republic of


15 Background Note: Azerbaijan, United States Department of State, March 23, 2012.

16 Although the events of the Armenian Genocide occurred many years ago – during the first quarter of the twentieth century – they are alleged to have been perpetrated by Ottoman Turks against Armenians. Similarly, Azerbaijan has historically been a part of the Ottoman Empire and shares the Islamic religion.


18 During the Soviet era, NKR was termed the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO).
Azerbaijan and unification with Armenia, as well as of NKR independence, respectively. Following the 1987 referendum, NKAO’s Council of Peoples’ Deputies appealed to the Azerbaijan SSR to secede and unite with Armenia. This request reportedly led to “sanctioned pogroms, mass killings, and actions of genocidal character” in various cities throughout NKR and Azerbaijan. In response, on January 12, 1989 the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR acknowledged the utility of temporary NKR governance and preserving its status as an autonomous region within Azerbaijan SSR. However, Soviet authority was delegated to Azerbaijan with the result that from April to October 1991, Azerbaijan launched further operations to force out ethnic Armenians from NKR; operation “Ring” removed ethnic Armenians from 24 NKR villages. Thereafter, social unrest led to the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh War as an effort by Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to protect NKR’s ethnic Armenians from alleged state persecution and by Azerbaijan to defend its territory.

Traditional criteria for a valid unilateral secession – a people subject to historical and persistent State-sponsored human rights abuse with no viable alternative within existing channels – thereby appear to be satisfied. The 1987 and 1991 referendums, discussed supra, indicate that domestic relief was first sought. These official efforts within the existing framework of the Azerbaijan SSR and the Soviet SSR to give voice to the popular will and to effectuate a transfer from Azerbaijan to Armenia were ignored. Azerbaijan’s government responded with alleged state-sponsored ethnic cleansing of its ethnic Armenian element. As self-determination and the call for independence simply were not respected, Karabakhs had only one alternative: to secede.

19 The 1987 referendum indicated overwhelming support from 80,000 voters, and led to the establishment of a Council to appeal for secession from Azerbaijan, unification with Armenia, and Soviet recognition of the transfer. The 1991 referendum was held under UN auspices, asking voters "whether they agree Nagorno-Karabakh to function as an independent state that freely determines all the forms of cooperation with other states and communities." Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh: Process of State Building at the Crossroad of Centuries, Institute of Political Research, 11, 16 (2009).

20 Id., 11. Among other towns, genocidal activity was reported in Sumgait, Baku, Kirovabad, Shamkhor, and Mingechaur. The February 1988 victims were hundreds of Armenians from Shahumia. Over 400,000 ethnic Armenians were also forced to flee Baku, northern NKR and rural areas in Azerbaijan. In January 1990, the killing of 200 ethnic Armenians in Baku resulted in this city becoming Armenian-free.

21 Id., 12.

22 Id., 13.

Over 30,000 people were killed in the fighting. Ultimately, Armenian and Karabakh forces seized Shusha – the historical Azerbaijani capital of NKR – and Lachin, which thereby linked NKR to Armenia. Hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani refugees fled as these troops advanced to control most of NKR and adjoining areas. The UN Security Council called for the immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces and adopted resolutions calling for the cessation of hostilities, unimpeded humanitarian relief efforts, and a peacekeeping force. Armed conflict ended with a cease-fire brokered by Russia on May 5, 1994.

Since then, NKR has existed relatively independently and has developed an executive, judiciary, and legislature. NKR’s President and legislature are democratically elected, and its government controls the armed forces and already engages with foreign states through its representative offices and at the OSCE-led peace talks. Thus, it arguably already has the ability to engage more appreciably with the community of nations. As with the ROC in Taiwan, NKR has representative offices in a variety of major industrialized states including the United States, France, Russia, Lebanon, Australia, and Armenia. Additionally, NKR’s development of military and civil forces that withstood a war is a testament to their durability.

Thus we presently have a state that functions independently yet lacks formal recognition by most major nations. In order to provide some closure, the OSCE Minsk Group was founded with co-chairs Russia, France and the United States spearheading peace talks. Russia recently confirmed that it intends to work exclusively through the Minsk Group toward a peaceful resolution of NKR’s status. Moreover, on the twentieth anniversary of the Minsk Group, the Foreign Ministers of the co-

24 Background Note: Azerbaijan, United States Department of State, March 23, 2012.

25 S.C. Res. 822, 853, 874, and 884.


28 Id.

29 Pursuant to the factors and declarative presumption of statehood as spelled out in the Montevideo Convention, discussed in III.A. See supra note 8.

chair nations issued a joint statement reiterating their insistence that only a negotiated settlement can yield lasting peace; they went on to oppose the use of force as “any delay in reaching a settlement will only prolong their hardships.”

To complicate matters, Azerbaijan appears to hold sway with the Great Powers due to its oil reserves; in fact, the State Oil Fund’s Executive Director reports directly to the President of Azerbaijan and the nation is considered one of the most important regions for oil exploration and development due to its access to the Caspian Basin.

Further toward this principle of unimpeded peace, these Great Power nations have the ability to progressively enable nation-building by independently engaging with NKR’s government. To this end, the OSCE Minsk Group has unsuccessfully attempted to convince Armenia and Azerbaijan to agree on “Basic Principles,” including the withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from the seven districts that they currently occupy around NKR; giving NKR a transitional status; ensuring direct communication between Armenia and NKR; the final settlement of NKR’s legal status; the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes; and ensuring international security guarantees and peacemaking operations in the region.

In spite of agreements to find a “political solution” in accordance with various existing protocols such as the United Nations Charter and the Helsinki Final Act’s prohibition on the use of force, there is no guarantee that the parties will actually accept the “Basic Principles” as they involve the removal of armed forces prior to a final resolution. Once an army has secured difficult gains on the battlefield, it has

\[ \text{31} \] Minsk Group Foreign Ministers on Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries, 22 March 2012, U.S. Department of State.

\[ \text{32} \] Background Note: Azerbaijan, United States Department of State, March 23, 2012. As of the end of 2011, SOFAZ had assets of USD $29.8 billion and is structured as a sovereign wealth fund that manages all state oil and natural gas revenue, and is responsible for preserving Azerbaijan’s economic stability, and helping to diversify its economy. In fact, about three-fourths of the consolidated state budget is funded by SOFAZ transfers and taxes paid by oil companies.

\[ \text{33} \] Id. The Caspian Basin is shared with Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline has a capacity of 1 million barrels per day, and the Shah Deniz project investment will likely make it even more productive.


\[ \text{35} \] See supra note 31.

\[ \text{36} \] By analogy, the Kashmir dispute has not progressed since the United Nations Security Council issued its recommendation in 1948 that Pakistan and India substantially de-militarize the region to enable a United Nations-supervised plebiscite. United Nations Security Council Resolution 47 The India-Pakistan Question, April 21, 1948. Although India was willing to accept this, there was simply
scant motivation to leave until and unless a final resolution on all outstanding issues is reached. Moreover, in an age of media scrutiny such a nation faces the conundrum of explaining to its war veterans and populace why it is ceding gains without receiving anything concrete in exchange. Pursuant to the “Basic Principles,” for example, Armenia’s incentive to remove its troops is that further talks – after twenty years of talking - might produce a lasting peace. This hope is simply too uncertain and illusory to be acceptable although it would be consistent with Liberal Realists’ views that principles – and not only armies – play a major role in international relations. Although the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs have affirmatively stated that the current situation is an “unacceptable status quo,” they aim to await an agreement by Armenia and Azerbaijan to move forward, i.e., by accepting the principles, and only then “to assist in the drafting of the peace agreement, and then to support its implementation with our international partners.”37 In effect, the process is stuck.

As we have concluded that the “Basic Principles” are unlikely to be accepted by the parties and that unilateral means are needed to propel the peace process, we need to examine the responsibility of the Great Powers to act. Before we do so, though, we will examine why NKR needs to obtain de jure recognition in the first place, in light of its current de facto independence. What does NKR gain from such diplomatic recognition?

B. The Value of Diplomatic Recognition

Out of concern for the stability of international law38 at some point the international community should ideally be able to conclude that a given state should or should not be recognized. However, there is no bright-line rule with regard to the amount of time that the state needs to exist independently before we can agree that it

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37 Joint Statement on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict by Dmitry Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, and Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the French Republic at the Deauville Summit of the Eight, May 26, 2011.

38 See Amichai Cohen, UN Recognition of a Palestinian State: A Legal Analysis. See supra note 4 (referring to UN recognition of Israel even before its government had full control of its existing territory).
is committed to the world community’s principles. Nonetheless, the present situation
in NKR clearly does not engender regional stability; instead, it threatens to go down
the Kashmir non-resolution path.

Although the Montevideo Convention is clear that “[t]he political existence of
the state is independent of recognition by the other states,”\textsuperscript{39} international recognition
is nonetheless deemed valuable. For one thing, recognition has been viewed as
expanding a state’s national interests although it does not dictate the threshold
question of the state’s existence.\textsuperscript{40}

Recognition may also be legally relevant because it creates estoppel, which
prevents the recognizing party from later contesting or denying the legal personality
of the new state. On the other hand, the acts of a non-recognized state can be
imputed to their recognized successors;\textsuperscript{41} in other words, a non-recognized state can
incur responsibilities without necessarily obtaining benefits that are incidental to
widespread recognition. This presents a potential disincentive to recognize a state, as
its contracts might in any case be respected under international law.

The credibility of a state on the world stage can often be a function of its
recognition status. The case of Taiwan - the classic unrecognized state - teaches us
that a nation’s standing can be limited by the absence of major power recognition. In
spite of having the world’s seventeenth largest economy, the Taiwanese delegation has
been embarrassed by not even being allowed to display its own national flag or sing its
own national anthem at the Olympics.\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, in light of the People’s Republic of
China (PRC)’s “one China” stance on diplomatic relations, most nations do not
accept a Taiwanese diplomatic delegation under the “Republic of China” (“ROC”)
title, opting instead for “Taipei Economic and Cultural Office,” “Taipei
Representative Office,” or “Chung Hwa Travel Service.”\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[40] See Lloyd Sheng-Pao Fan, My Land, Your Land, But Never China’s: An Analysis of Taiwan’s Sovereignty and Its Claim to Statehood, Taiwan International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 141-81, 171 (2007).
\item[41] Tinoco Concessions v. Costa Rica (Great Britain v. Costa Rica) (1923) 1 R.I.A.A. 369 (holding that the United Kingdom’s lack of recognition for the Tinoco regime in Costa Rica did not estop it from later asserting claims against a successor regime based on contracts entered into by the Tinoco government).
\item[42] Pursuant to an International Olympic Committee (IOC) determination called the “Nagoya Resolution” which recognized the Olympic Committee in Beijing as the “Chinese Olympic Committee” while simultaneously designating Taiwan’s delegation as the “Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee.” Whereas the Chinese Olympic Committee was allowed to use the PRC’s anthem and flag, Taiwan was ordered to change its anthem and flag. Ying Wushanley, Waltzing on Ice: Lake Placid, the Carter Doctrine, and China’s Return to the Olympics, 133.
\end{footnotes}
Moreover, when a state ultimately provides recognition to another state this usually means that it will allow the recognized state to enjoy customary privileges and immunities within its borders; thus, the decision is usually a political one rather than legal.\textsuperscript{44} To that end, large communities of expatriate citizens tend to exert pressure on foreign governments to recognize their home states. To them, recognition is certainly meaningful.

In the instant case, the sizeable presence of an Armenian diaspora in Uruguay could make that nation the first non-regional state to recognize NKR.\textsuperscript{45} As the only nations that currently recognize NKR are not Great Powers – specifically, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Abkhazia – such a designation by Uruguay might convince the rest of the world to adopt a similar stance. The fact that Uruguay has not officially gone forward with such recognition, however, underscores the traditional leadership exercised by the Great Powers in this regard.

C. Traditional Recognition Theories

The fact of statehood does not necessarily dictate a state’s freedom of action; rather, sovereignty is “an ‘essentially relative question’ – dependent on whatever law there is to curtail it.”\textsuperscript{46} Disagreement over the appropriate theory of recognition – declaratory, constitutive or a hybrid thereof – accounts for this perceived relativity.

Once de facto statehood under the Montevideo Convention (MC) has been achieved, the failure of Great Powers to recognize a new state appears to impinge upon the new state’s rights granted by the MC. Article 3 of the MC specifically provides that:

> Even before recognition the state has the right to defend its integrity and independence, to provide for its conservation and prosperity, and consequently to organize itself as it sees fit, to legislate upon its interests, administer its services, and to define the jurisdiction and competence of its courts....The exercise of these rights has no other limitation than the

\textsuperscript{44} Nurullah Yamali, \textit{What Is Meant by State Recognition in International Law?}, 5.

\textsuperscript{45} Uruguay accepted many Armenian refugees, especially after the Armenian Genocide. Perhaps due to the influence of this Armenian diaspora community, Uruguay’s Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that “I am sure that Nagorno-Karabakh must be independent and eventually reunited with Armenia. This is the only way to solve the problem.” \textit{Uruguay Recognizes the Nagorno-Karabakh}, bakutoday.net, September 10, 2011.

exercise of the rights of other states according to international law.47

Inherent within this “right to defend its integrity and independence” is arguably the right to require other states to recognize its existence and its right to so defend. The MC attempts to reconcile this inconsistency by affirming the equality of states and affirmatively stating that the “rights of each one do not depend upon the power which it possesses to assure its exercise, but upon the simple fact of its existence as a person under international law.”48 If this is so, how can we explain why some states appear to have more sway in the international arena?

The MC endorses a declaratory theory of recognition, i.e., that “the political existence of the state is independent of recognition by the other states.”49 In other words, no affirmative recognition by other states is necessary. However, the effect of any such affirmative recognition would be to “merely signif[y] that the state which recognizes it accepts the personality of the other with all the rights and duties determined by international law.”50

By contrast, the constitutive theory of recognition requires affirmative approval by the community of nations. This reflects the Realist concern inherent within the concept of recognition, i.e., that a new state must be respected by other states in order for its declaration of sovereignty to have practical effect. By virtue of the structure of the international arena, some posit that “the formal reception by others” is necessary for a state to be assured of its “place and rank.”51

A third explanation for this inconsistency is found in Lauterpacht’s view – which has not been generally accepted – that existing states have an affirmative duty to recognize states that meet the four MC statehood factors.52 The acceptance of this proposition would bring the constitutive school in line with declaratory principles.

48 Id., Art. 4.
49 Id., Art. 3.
50 Id., Art. 6.
52 See Sterio, supra note 9, at 74 (citing Louis Henkin, International Law: Politics and Values 13–15
Ultimately, one of the primary considerations for a state in deciding whether to recognize a new government is whether it has *de facto* control. Sometimes this test is insufficient and states have taken other factors into account, including whether the new government is ready to honor the international obligations of its predecessor, whether it is democratic, whether it has come to power through aggression, and its political nature.

III. INTERNATIONAL LAW, CUSTOM AND POLITICS OF STATE RECOGNITION

As the right to self-determination has been enshrined within the International Bill of Human Rights, international law has traditionally focused efforts on domestic reforms. However, this concept has also been used to support secessionist struggles, i.e., external self-determination, where domestic avenues of representation are alleged to be effectively unavailable, futile and/or have been exhausted. Moreover, the United Nations’ Declaration on Friendly Relations provides all people with the right to determine their own political status: “[t]he establishment of a sovereign and independent State or the emergence into any other political status freely determined by a people constitute modes of implementing the right of self-determination by that people.” Thus, an existing state’s claim to territorial integrity can be negated where it does not conduct itself "in compliance with the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples" and does not allow a subject people "to pursue their economic, social and cultural development." However, such an outcome is only available as “a last resort when the State lacks either the will or the power to enact and

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53 This includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (and its optional protocols), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. *Fact Sheet No.2 (Rev.1), The International Bill of Human Rights*, Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. Article 1 in both covenants provides for the universal right of self-determination in the form of representative democracy, and calls upon states to promote the realization of that right and to respect it.

54 See, e.g., Milena Sterio, *On the Right to External Self-Determination: “Selfistans,” Secession, and the Great Powers’ Rule*, Minnesota Journal of International Law, 19(1), 2010. For a discussion of circumstances where a claim to independence was denied, see *Reference re Secession of Quebec*, 2 S.C.R. 217 (1998) (holding that Quebec was not entitled to secede because Canada represents its people equally, without discrimination and thus was entitled to deference to its own right to territorial integrity). In spite of the hope for secessionist movements that the Quebec decision provides under appropriate facts, customary international law has not consistently held a right of secession.

apply just and effective guarantees.”

Hence, the prospects for guaranteeing human rights and allowing the Karabakh Armenians to pursue their "economic, social and cultural development" under Azerbaijani rule, even with Azerbaijani assurances of local autonomy, are not very promising. As discussed in II.A. supra, ethnic Armenian efforts at representation within Azerbaijan have been thoroughly exhausted, frustrated, and effectively laid the seed for the present struggle. Under these circumstances, the NKR claim to a right to external self-determination appears to be legitimate. One wrinkle exists: NKR is no longer subject to persecution by Azerbaijan as it is now de facto independent. However, in the absence of Great Power assistance a military build-up by oil-rich Azerbaijan could again threaten NKR Armenians’ basic rights to human dignity and self-determination.

Ultimately, to the extent that MC criteria has been relied upon to yield a successful recognition effort, the winning ingredient appears to be the support for recognition by the world community and in particular by the leadership of the Great Powers. However, their whim is not the only relevant factor.

A. Montevideo Convention - Predictable Patterns and “Trump Cards”

Are there predictable recognition patterns based on satisfying MC criteria? The universe of historical self-determination struggles is admittedly limited. Nonetheless, within this portfolio clear patterns emerge from which it is possible to extrapolate lessons about the fact scenarios that we can predictably expect to generate favorable international reception. There are two general fact scenarios: the post-colonial context where the local populace is widely understood to have been denied adequate representation by a foreign power, and the non-post-colonial context in which one or more groups claim their concerns are not being – and cannot be – represented internally and that only secession can address this.

In this regard, Kumbaro presents two examples representing post-colonial scenarios in which some MC criteria are present. First, self-determination had not been properly measured in Eritrea – no referendum – as part of the UN

56 Id.
58 See supra note 9.
determination of its status after the British trusteeship ended in 1952. In addition to Eritrean control over its own territory, an MC factor, a strong case could thus be made for recognition of the instant movement.

Second, Portugal withdrew from its colonial mandate in East Timor after a civil war broke out between East Timor freedom-fighters and Indonesian unionists that favored annexing the region. Although Indonesia invaded the region and forcibly annexed it, the United Nations ignored its territorial claim as the popular will had not been consulted; thus, the results of a subsequent UN-administered referendum organized by an international organization – the United Nations Administration Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) - was acknowledged as representing the true will of the people. The lesson appears to be that, at least in the post-colonial context, the international community is willing to allow a degree of flexibility in determining whether to recognize an independence struggle. Perhaps this represents an acknowledgement of the wrongfulness of colonialism itself? Or Great Power guilt?

By contrast, this flexibility is all but absent in the non-colonial context. The forcible annexation by the Soviet Union of the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia presented the international community with an opportunity to disregard the Soviet annexation. Although most of the MC criteria were present in each case, the international community did not recognize these states as independent. As Kumbaro points out further, however, this decision was accompanied by the inability on the part of the secessionist movements to regain control over their own territory – also an MC criterion – as well as relative independence within the Soviet Union, the de facto reality of Soviet hegemony at the time, and a lack of protest against the decision to not recognize. The lesson appears to be that the four MC criteria are essential before a state can claim entitlement to international recognition. Moreover, international politics likely played a role: opposition by the Soviet Union meant that no other Great Power was so interested in the plight of the Baltics as to risk a confrontation.

As an exception to this rule, Kumbaro further notes that in the case of the former Yugoslavia, although the international community initially rejected secessionist claims in favor of Yugoslav territorial integrity, it quickly recognized the former

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60 This decision was presumably based upon the UN principle: “all Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.” United Nations Charter, 2(3).


62 By contrast, Russia intervened in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; in this case, the international community favored Georgia out of concern for Russian expansionism.
constituent states even while armed struggle continued. This is apparently the result of the Security Council resolution’s characterization of the struggle’s continuation as an imminent threat to international peace and security.⁶³ As the international community was unwilling to recognize the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under these circumstances, the secessionist struggles were all but guaranteed recognition and support. Moreover, there was no “Great Power” interest that opposed such an interpretation.

The lesson from all this appears to be that, in the post-colonial scenario the international community appears to have a bias in favor of recognition due to the historical lack of ascertainment of the popular will. In the non-post-colonial plain vanilla scenario, the presence of all four MC criteria is largely necessary though not sufficient for international recognition. However, if an additional “positive trump card” is present – as in the case of the former Yugoslav states – certain struggles that may not obviously exhibit all four MC criteria might nonetheless be granted recognition out of greater concern for international, rather than regional, peace. By contrast, if an additional “negative trump card” is present – as in the case of Taiwan – struggles that do exhibit all four MC criteria might nonetheless be denied international recognition.

In the case of NKR, strong oil interests disfavor Armenia’s position as much of the industrialized world sees Azerbaijani oil as an alternative source for their energy needs. Thus, it might be politically expedient to not answer the call for self-determination. Moreover, tensions on the battlefield have been in large part subdued such that only minor border clashes continue. Thus, there is now little concern that the dispute will pose a threat to international peace and security, such as might serve the basis for a call to concerted Security Council economic and/or military intervention. Other factors, however, might serve as an appropriate legal basis for NKR’s recognition.

B. Regional Custom of State Recognition

Another source of international law is custom, which can be a universal custom, a regional custom, or a course of conduct between two or more particular states. The hallmark of custom is obligation.

In this regard, the Guidelines on the Recognition of New States in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union⁶⁴ are instructive for determining whether a custom of diplomatic engagement or recognition exists in the NKR region, i.e., in concluding whether a regional custom governs. The Guidelines provide, in part, that:

The Community and its Member States will not recognize entities which are the result of aggression. They would take account of the effects of recognition on neighboring (sic.) States. The commitment to these principles opens the way to recognition by the Community and its Member States and to the establishment of diplomatic relations. It could be laid down in agreements.

Moreover, the Guidelines include several values intrinsic to recognizing new states, including “guarantees for the rights of ethnic and national groups and minorities.”65 Applicants for recognition must commit “to adopt constitutional and political guarantees ensuring that [they] ha[ve] no territorial claims towards a neighbouring (sic.) Community State and that [they] will conduct no hostile propaganda activities versus a neighbouring (sic.) Community State, including the use of a denomination which implies territorial claims.”

This language tends to imply that, as long as a state does not attempt to impinge upon the territorial claims of its neighbors and provides for its subjects’ human rights, it has a strong argument in favor of recognition. The presence of all MC criteria would further this finding. Moreover, the Guidelines, the Badinter Commission’s Opinion No. 3,66 and the lessons of Yugoslavia indicate respect for the principle of *uti possidetis* - that the former boundaries should become international borders so as to affect inter-state relations as little as possible.67 By contrast, the Badinter Commission’s findings on self-determination68 also favor characterization of a “minority group” as a “people” within the definition of the UN Charter, so as to

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65 Id. Additional stated values include: “respect for the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations and the commitments subscribed to in the Final Act of Helsinki and in the Charter of Paris, especially with regard to the rule of law, democracy and human rights; respect for the inviolability of all frontiers which can only be changed by peaceful means and by common agreement; acceptance of all relevant commitments with regard to disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation as well as to security and regional stability; and commitment to settle by agreement, including where appropriate by recourse to arbitration, all questions concerning State succession and regional disputes.”

66 Established to resolve issues arising out of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Opinion No. 3 related to borders reinforced the principle of *uti possidetis.*

67 Legal Information Institute, “Uti Possidetis Juris.”

68 Badinter Commission Opinion #2 provides that the Serbian people in Yugoslavia are entitled to nationality selection. It states, in relevant part, “that the Republics must afford the members of those minorities and ethnic groups all the human rights and fundamental freedoms recognized in international law, including, where appropriate, the right to choose their nationality.”
support their ability to determine their own nationality. These appear to be the customary regional principles of recognition.

These principles bring mixed news for the NKR movement for secession: although NKR certainly meets all four MC criteria, inevitably the heart of its claim conflicts with *uti possidetis* as the pre-conflict borders placed NKR within Azerbaijan in spite of historical evidence of the region’s autonomy and common heritage with Armenia. Under similar facts, Kosovo was denied international recognition early in its independence movement, in spite of the presence of MC factors, due to Serbia’s conflicting territorial claim that Kosovo is contained within its borders. As in the NKR scenario, the movement for secession arose out of ethnic tension; there was a predominance of ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo and of ethnic Albanians elsewhere in the region. After years of unsuccessful negotiations with Serbia and a NATO bombing campaign, Kosovo was brought under UN administration. Subsequently, a Republic of Kosovo was declared that has been recognized by eighty-nine UN members and the ROC.

The regional custom thus appears to favor self-determination efforts under the Guidelines’ principles of respect for the rule of law, democracy and human rights. However, historical borders are also respected. With regard to the NKR conflict, although the parties are still negotiating under the OSCE’s Minsk Group, as stated previously there is little hope of resolution as the “Basic Principles” envision tangible, immediate concessions without tangible, immediate returns. Specifically, they require Armenia’s de-militarization of the border provinces and the presence of UN peacekeeping forces that might potentially undermine Azerbaijan’s territorial claims. Moreover, the co-chairs continue to base their conceptions of the future on an unwillingness to accept the present context; i.e., the fact that Armenians and Azers will not happily co-exist and thus neither party is likely to accept the “Basic Principles.”

Certainly, Azerbaijan is not a superpower that can exert the pressures that China was able to respect to Taiwan’s sovereignty claims. However, Azerbaijan has been able to successfully exercise influence over the Great Powers due to its

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70 Recently, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion that Kosovo’s declaration of independence did not violate international law. “Kosovo Independence Declaration is Legal, UN Court Rules,” *Huffington Post*, July 22, 2010.

71 See Danilo Türk, *Recognition of States: A Comment*, European Journal of International Law, v. 4, 66-71 (1993) (arguing that the failure of European Community leaders to accept the contemporary fact that Yugoslavia was a defunct state, rather than constantly working to bring its constituencies back together, has postponed the resolution of competing recognition claims).
strategic access to oil;\textsuperscript{72} thus, NKR potentially has a “negative trump card.” Moreover, there is not currently a Yugoslavia-type scenario of civil war that can imminently threaten international peace and security, wreck havoc upon millions, align the world powers and potentially lead to world war; thus, there is no “positive trump card” that can force the UN Security Council to intervene on the ground without the express invitation of both parties. On the other hand, a history of state persecution of NKR ethnic Armenians by Azerbaijani authorities provides a powerful “positive trump card.” Therefore, we have a stalemate as we have for the past twenty years. To make matters worse, religious differences – ethnic Armenians are mainly Christian, ethnic Azers are predominantly Muslim – make the struggle for NKR, just as in Kashmir and Kosovo, a symbolic one tinged with ideology.

As a way forward, it is helpful to extrapolate from the Badinter Commission’s findings with respect to Yugoslav Serbs.\textsuperscript{73} The lesson is that, in the event of Yugoslavia-like conditions in NKR, we might expect concerted action to intervene to restore peace and impose a referendum. In reality, the NKR situation differs notably from Yugoslavia as there is no large-scale general war that threatens international – as opposed to regional or national – security. However, an argument can be made that a general war should not be required in order to give effect to fundamental human rights such as the right to determine one’s nationality. To be clear, the Badinter Commission’s findings would likely support ethnic Armenian nationhood, either in the form of NKR state recognition or annexation by Armenia.

By contrast, an argument can be made that only the specific ethnic hostilities within Yugoslavia actually necessitated widespread state recognition; by extension, anything short of this might not implicate gross human rights violations. Moreover, widespread conflict may have diminished the importance of a competing claim for territorial integrity, especially as it seemed that there was no Yugoslavia remaining to assert such a claim.

In light of these competing claims, who can be the responsible tie-breaker?

IV. THE TIE-BREAKER: CUSTOM OF ENHANCED SUPERPOWER RESPONSIBILITY

A. Traditional Views on Superpower Responsibility for Recognition

\textsuperscript{72} See supra notes 32-3 and the discussion in II.A.

\textsuperscript{73} See supra note 68 with regard to Opinion #2.
Traditionally, Superpowers have intervened where doing so is in their own interest. This was perhaps more transparent before the founding of the United Nations, and is consistent with the traditional dominance of classical Realism in international relations.\textsuperscript{74} Brownlie echoes the Realist position in stating that “recognition is an optional and political act and there is no duty in this regard.”\textsuperscript{75}

This position, however, is opposed by the presumptive international obligation of Great Powers “to not serve exclusively the interests of their national policy and convenience regardless of the principles of international law.”\textsuperscript{76} This finding is consistent with Liberal realist thinking that advances the influence of principles agreed upon by a “community of nations” over military capability alone. Additionally, certain morality-based arguments support the idea that action should be based on truth.\textsuperscript{77} As an example, Mahatma Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement enlisted Western media to assist in India’s freedom struggle from British sovereignty. By demonstrating to the world the injustice of British rule over India, the message was that world opinion should be based on the reality of unjust British policies and immoral British treatment of Indians. By this analysis, the economic interests of the British East India Company were rendered irrelevant. This worldview would similarly render Western oil interests in Azerbaijan meaningless, and human rights to be of paramount concern; i.e., the rights of NKR’s population would guide world opinion to censure the OSCE co-chairs to apply pressure as outlined infra.

In any case, the Great Powers’ actions set precedents that have formed a variety of international customs. Moreover, the existence of some customs by certain Great Powers can have the effect of making such customs binding upon others. This might be because a “subglobal group of nations” possesses the appropriate mix of characteristics to develop a particular custom;\textsuperscript{78} some such nations have played a

\textsuperscript{74} Classic Realism considered moral theorizing around international responsibilities as futile. See Allen Buchanan and David Golove, \textit{Philosophy of International Law} in The Oxford Handbook of Jurisprudence and Philosophy of Law (2002) (arguing \textit{inter alia} that the Realist perspective may imply alternatively (i) that moral “oughts” do not apply in international relations, i.e., there are no true or justified statements about what anyone ought morally to do; (ii) that no actor behaves or will behave morally in international relations; or (iii) that moral behavior in international relations is fundamentally irrational and therefore infrequent).


\textsuperscript{77} See, among other sources, Mohandas Gandhi’s \textit{My Autobiography}.

leading role in the development of international law. The Great Powers are on this list, as is India in guiding nations seeking independence through the influence of Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement.

Through this lens, the OSCE co-chairs – the Great Powers here – have the responsibility to do more than continue to wait for a miracle. As the United States, France, and Russia already agree that one of the six “Basic Principles” involves the legal resolution of NKR’s status, they can incentivize Armenia and Azerbaijan to resolve their remaining issues by declaring recognition of NKR’s transitional status and at least engaging with its government. Ultimately, this may ripen into full recognition - or de-recognition – but in the interim it will have served its purpose of pressuring the parties to produce a final resolution. This is especially important where it is clear that requiring de-militarization without any concrete gain in exchange is futile and can potentially complicate the peace process further. Moreover, the lack of a large-scale, Yugoslavia-type conflict removes any other pressure that might otherwise have assisted in bringing the conflict to a prompt conclusion.

Such an act would not necessarily be interpreted as frustrating the purpose of the Minsk Group, and indeed can facilitate the “lasting peace” at the outset by helping to resolve one of the key outstanding issues. In fact, diplomatic engagement by major states is the only feasible means for more universal engagement and recognition.

B. Responsibility by Omission: Failure to Recognize

In addition to the traditional four factors considered by the MC as necessary to establishing a state, an additional requirement appears to be the moral backing by the community of nations. Therefore, when states have failed to garner such support the world community has acted by failing to recognize them. Especially when there is some humanitarian concern, or where territory was acquired through the use of force, a strong tradition of non-recognition appears in numerous treaties and has risen to the level of international customary law (ICL). ICL can arise where a substantial number of states ratify relevant treaties or engage in conduct reflecting their assent. Moreover, it can bind parties that are non-signatories or did not engage in such practice; however, states do have the ability to argue that certain customs do not bind them by demonstrating that they have consistently adopted a contrasting position as a “persistent objector.” By contrast, certain customs are non-derogable when they have reached the level of *jus cogens*, these ordinarily prescribe such a basic level of responsibility that states cannot opt out of them under international law.
For example, territorial acquisition through the use of force has a long history of international non-recognition, and has been enshrined as a basic tenet of the UN Charter as well as in several treaties:

(1) Even before the Second World War, the moral responsibility to not recognize such acts was a central tenet of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which effectively outlawed war among its signatories in 1928 – ultimately 62 nations – though it was never enforced.

(2) Following the Second World War, the UN Charter provides: “[t]he Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.” Additionally, “all Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.”

Territorial acquisition through force would patently fly in the face of this principle. 193 parties have signed on to the Charter, and have thereby accepted this principle, including 49 original signatories, and 144 acceding parties.

(3) The Bogota Charter of the Organization of American States provides that “no territorial acquisition or special advantage obtained either by force or by other means of coercion should be recognised (sic.).” It was signed in 1948 and ultimately included 35 states.

(4) Several provisions adopted by the General Assembly articulated the prevailing sentiment on territorial expansion: the 1946 Draft Declaration on the Rights and Duties of States provides that “every State has the duty to refrain from recognizing any territorial acquisition by another State” which is violating the territorial integrity of a third state; and the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation Among States in Accordance with the United Nations Charter proclaimed that “no territorial acquisition resulting from the threat or use of force shall be recognized as legal.”

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79 United Nations Charter, art. 2(1).
80 Id., art. 2(3).
81 Additionally, the United Nations adopted the Nuremberg Charter to govern World War II-related acts and included “crimes against peace” within its prosecutorial ambit. These included (i) planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances; and (ii) participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any such acts.
82 Similarly, the Definition of Aggression Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 14, 1974, provides in Article 5(3) that “no territorial acquisition or special advantage resulting from aggression is or shall be recognised (sic.) as lawful.”
Based on this general historical consensus, we can conclude that a universal custom prohibiting the recognition of territorial expansion has been established and binds the community of nations under ICL.

In spite of this custom of non-recognition for acts of aggression that impinge upon a subject state’s territorial integrity, other factors might play a supervening role. In the case of NKR, the facts do not necessarily indicate Armenia’s territorial expansion but rather a long-standing self-determination effort among ethnic Armenians within NKR. As discussed supra in II.A., although one referendum indicated approval of annexation by Armenia, another indicated preference for NKR independence. These details would indicate that there would not be much strength in a moral argument opposing recognition of NKR independence.

Additionally, where there is some humanitarian concern for a targeted population’s suffering, there is a strong moral tradition of withholding state recognition. As discussed supra, Rhodesia and the South Africa-created Bantustan governments fit this category. Similarly, during the 1976 Montreal Olympics eighteen African countries and five Arab neighbors boycotted Canada due to the International Olympic Committee (IOC)’s refusal to ban New Zealand, as New Zealand had sent a rugby team to apartheid South Africa which had been banned from Olympic competition since 1968.83

In the case of NKR, the widespread humanitarian violations discussed above would disfavor international recognition of an Azerbaijani claim to NKR’s territory on moral grounds as well as in accordance with the principles of the Badinter Commission and the Guidelines.

C. Responsibility by Positive Act

Humanitarian crises have engendered a strong tradition of Great Power affirmative involvement and engagement with emerging states in their recognition efforts. As NKR independence follows a history of persecution, this is especially relevant in determining whether we can expect any Great Power involvement outside of the OSCE talks. Principles of self-determination underlie any Great Power responsibility to take affirmative action.84

In addition to international law supportive of self-determination efforts, as discussed in III. above, there is also a custom in favor of humanitarian efforts in the face of mass atrocities. This concept is often referred to as a responsibility to protect,


84 See supra, note 11 referencing scholarship related to NKR’s right to self-determination.
and can be divided into three commitments: to prevent, to react and to re-build. The UN General Assembly approved of this concept and related it to the Security Council’s Chapter 7 “threat to peace” concept in providing that:

Each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity....The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In this context, we are prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII, on a case-by-case basis and in cooperation with relevant regional organizations as appropriate, should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity....We also intend to commit ourselves, as necessary and appropriate, to helping States build capacity to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and to assisting those which are under stress before crises and conflicts break out.

In this regard, Richard Haass aptly summarizes the instances justifying foreign intervention: where a state commits or fails to prevent genocide or crimes against humanity in its territory; where countries find it necessary to take action to protect their nationals against other states that harbor international terrorists; and where states pursue weapons of mass destruction. As Sterio points out, this responsibility to protect was acted upon by a UN-sanctioned coalition that launched an offensive in

85 Adele Brown, Reinventing Humanitarian Intervention: Two Cheers for the Responsibility to Protect, House of Commons Library Research Paper 08/55 (2008) (arguing that such a responsibility is the duty of the international community where there is a “manifest failure” of a particular state to discharge its responsibilities to its citizens; that military intervention to stop atrocities would be the most controversial aspect; and that the legality of unilateral action – without Security Council authorization – is questionable).


northern Iraq on behalf of Kurds who were alleged to be persecuted by the Iraqi government. Additionally, NATO intervened in Kosovo due to Serbia’s publicized persecution of ethnic Albanian Muslims. Moreover, an argument was made for intervention in Burma after authorities there obviously failed to respond adequately to cyclone Nargis; the intentional denial of humanitarian assistance was claimed to implicate a crime against humanity and to thereby trigger a responsibility to protect. Similarly, the doctrine was used to invoke international humanitarian assistance in Haiti in the aftermath of the 2008 earthquake as a “threat to peace” with its concomitant refugee problems. In each of these instances, a humanitarian crisis was a pre-requisite.

In the case of NKR, despite the history of the Armenian Genocide after the First World War and substantial evidence of pogroms and targeted ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan, there has been little international intervention. As the situation on the ground has stabilized, the international community nonetheless continues to have a strong case in favor of intervention on behalf of NKR’s Armenians to avoid the recurrence of a humanitarian crisis. This follows upon the commitment to re-build which is inherent in the responsibility to protect.

Although such an act might be viewed as unnecessary because no large-scale human rights violation currently exists, the Great Powers have in the past exercised their responsibility to lead the world in dealing with novel situations. For example, in following the Guidelines with respect to Macedonia, the Great Powers – in this case, the EU – insisted on expanding the criteria for recognition beyond those required by the Badinter Commission: because the term “Macedonia” historically also included areas in Greece – which felt such a moniker threatened its own territory – the new republic would be required to use a name that excluded this term.

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88 Id., 156.
89 Id., 156-7.
90 As Brown points out, the legal basis to prosecute a crime against humanity was ostensibly Article 8(2)(b)(xv) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court on war crimes: “Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully (sic.) impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions.”
92 Id., 152-3.
Moreover, it is not suggested that the Great Powers intervene unilaterally on the ground, only that they engage diplomatically with the NKR government and guide it to a final resolution.

V. CONCLUSION

We conclude that there is a custom mandating state recognition, though not exactly as it was envisioned by MC criteria. First, this custom is localized to the region of the former Soviet Union pursuant to the Guidelines, as discussed above. Second, there is no mandate that the Great Powers take any action to actually recognize; rather, they need only engage with NKR. Ultimately, their own fact-finding, as well as domestic politics and actions of other nations, will determine whether they recognize or decide to not recognize. At that point, and on the basis of their own findings, these nations will be under a self-imposed obligation to act.

The heart of this claim is that the world’s Great Powers have an enhanced responsibility to independently evaluate whether they should extend diplomatic recognition to NKR; this responsibility can only be executed by acting without regard to the outcome of OSCE-led negotiations or concerted action through the United Nations. Additionally, these powers cannot arbitrarily make this determination on the basis of self-interest; rather, the duty is to act objectively. With great power comes great responsibility.

This might include welcoming NKR as an independent state in the community of nations and recognizing its government. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that NKR’s self-determination efforts have been widely received as substantially consistent with conventional thinking on international humanitarian law (IHL) and the appropriate use of force as a means to obtain independence. Additionally, international custom favors a responsibility to protect people that have suffered humanitarian crisis; although the situation has largely been stabilized on the ground, the commitment to re-build still exists and continues to implicate Great Power engagement with NKR.

Among the forms that recognition can take can include a written declaration, entering diplomatic or treaty negotiations with the new state, and sending and receiving agents. Regardless of the outcome of the OSCE effort, therefore, the

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93 As Brown points out, the legality of doing so would be met with uncertainty. See supra note 85.

leading powers of the world community now appear to have a ripened duty to effectively engage with NKR; their actions would be persuasive upon the European Community and the Minsk Group members. We can only hope for widespread acceptance of an independent Nagorno-Karabakh as the dream of a long-suffering people, if there is concerted initiative of one Great Power at a time.