

The Paradox of “State Failure”: States Matter; Take them Seriously

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In the scientific community of scholarly researchers, no study can begin without a concept – the word or words that identify the subject to be studied, what part of the real world is included in that subject, and what should not be included. In the political world of policy and journalism, too, labels are crucial: they signal an issue, frame how the audience will perceive it, and thus also exclude from consideration issues that are intended *not* to be considered.

The concept of state failure is used so frequently by politicians, journalists, and policy-oriented researchers that it has become a reality. It has a meaning to each of these actors and is now the subject of serious research and policy recommendations. No one questions whether there is such a thing.

But what does this label include and exclude? What is state failure? When should we label a state failed? Why do we use the term? Do we know its causes? What can be done to prevent it or remedy it? These questions receive so little analysis that one could be excused from wondering whether there is such a thing as state failure after all and, thus, what the political purpose of the label is.

The Focus on Consequences

The beginnings of an answer lie in its actual usage which is always a focus on the presumed *consequences* of state failure, not on the thing itself. In the early 1990s when

the label gains currency, the primary concern is the violence and atrocities of civil war and the associated humanitarian catastrophes of death, disease, displacement, and famine. By the mid-1990s, the consequences of civil war for development – its physical destruction, expenditures on military rather than peaceful ends, and inability to service debts – was the focus of the World Bank and bilateral development agencies. The concept of human security, which the UN Development Programme introduced in its 1994 Human Development Report to redefine security in terms of development indices, with persons rather than states at the center, was embraced by a group of countries calling themselves the Lysøen group, led by Norway, Canada, and Japan, as a firmer foundation for global security than Cold-War armaments. The same opportunity of 1989-90 sparked members of the human rights community to seek better enforcement of international human rights conventions by focusing on states that failed to live up to their international obligations to protect their citizens against abuse. States, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty concluded in 2001¹ (and the 2004 Report of the Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Threats, Challenge and Change reasserted²), had a “responsibility to protect” their citizens and others living in their territory. If they failed that responsibility, the international community had both a right and an obligation to intervene and reverse the consequences. Each focus of outsiders’ concern – armed conflict, failing development, internal displacement and refugees, famine and epidemics, human rights abuses – were a result of state failure, whether the collapse of the state entirely or the failure of political leaders to act as they should.

¹ *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2001).

² *A More Secure World: Our shared responsibility* (New York: United Nations, 2004).

The change in the international environment provoked by the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, reinforced this focus, but the consequences for outsiders were now more direct. Failed states like Afghanistan and Somalia were ideal environments for terrorist networks to organize, train, and attack the wealthiest and most powerful countries in the world. By September 2002, the United States identified “fragile states” as a primary threat to US national security in its new National Security Strategy, and its development agency, USAID, refocused its aid strategy.³ Many European states and the European Union soon followed suit.⁴ Civil war and its consequences took a back seat to terrorism, followed by trafficking in illegal commodities (arms, drugs, diamonds, human beings) and, most recently, disease -- HIV/AIDS, SARS, and fears aroused by the inability to contain global epidemics such as avian bird flu. But in each case, the cause was state failure.

A Threatening Label?

The focus on consequences did not result, however, in a quest for explanation. Why would state failure have these consequences, and what, in turn, causes state failure? An easy label for the woes of the world, it was also an optimistic label, implying that something could be done. Yet the label was applied to an amazing range of political circumstances, many obviously very different from each other, while the actual connection between state failure and its imputed consequences was taken as a given, not investigated. Nor does the use of the term imply any common set of assumptions or policies. Although all four international communities concerned – humanitarian, human

³ *Fragile States Strategy* (U.S. Agency for International Development: January 2005).

⁴ For the UK, for example, *Investing in Prevention: An International Strategy to Manage Risks of Instability and Improve Crisis Response* (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit Report to the Government, London, February 2005).

rights, development, and security – use the same label, they mean very different things by it, including the policies they propose to address the problem.

The vagueness of the concept and its apparently wide applicability also provoked a strong reaction in areas of the world where the problem was said to be. To them, the label was itself a threat, wielded by the powerful states as a new pretext for intervention into the domestic orders of sovereign states. Their most common response was to deny its existence entirely or to resist any application of the term to one's own country, for fear of the consequences of being so classified. Sensitive to this sensitivity, diplomats in powerful countries began to change the modifying adjective to appear less offensive: fragile states, crisis states, states at risk of instability, even warlord states seemed better. Researchers in the global South went further, actively proposing alternatives that would more realistically capture the issues at stake: for example, in Latin America, human security, urban violence, or crisis of the state;⁵ in China, nontraditional security threats; in Africa, transnational networks – the northern businesses and strong states who actually made trafficking in illicit goods profitable -- or political community, the real basis of political identity and provision of basic needs;⁶ in the Middle East, on the debilitating effects of American power in the region.

While the sensitivity among some in the North to the message the label can send suggests their openness to dialogue and to North-South cooperation where failing states can threaten regional as well as international security, those who live in those countries and regions do not appear in a mood to reciprocate. To them, the label says far more

⁵ See, for example, Bernardo Sorj, "Security, Human Security and Latin America" (Edelstein Center for Social Research, January 2005), and the project on "State Crisis, International Governance and Security" at Torcuato Di Tella University in Buenos Aires under the direction of Monica Hirst and Roberto Russell.

⁶ See Abdul Raufu Mustapha, "States, Predation and Violence: Reconceptualizing Political Action and Political Community in Africa," 10th General Assembly of CODESRIA, Kampala, 8-12 December 2002.

about how little has changed in Northern perceptions of the South, with its implicit prejudices and denial of global and Northern responsibility for the consequences of concern.⁷

The Need for Differentiation

This latter group are correct. The perceived threats to international security identified with state failure are often due to quite separate causes. In some cases the label is used entirely politically, to generate international opposition to regimes undergoing complex political transitions, such as Albania or Zimbabwe, or even social revolutions, as in Bolivia or Venezuela. The foreign insistence on domestic reforms of the same kind to prevent state collapse and to restore state capacity and legitimacy after civil war, two very different sets of tasks and problems, suggest another ideological agenda. In cases where the state does actually fail to prevent one of the outcomes of international concern, it is often a very specific failure which might have been prevented had external parties not refused to respond to calls for temporary help from governments struggling to manage a genuine vulnerability, such as the refusal to provide transitional credits to service Yugoslavia's foreign debt during the radical economic reform of then Prime Minister Markovic in April 1991⁸ or the failure to respond in time to the threat of famine in Niger in 2005, foreseen long in advance and aid explicitly requested.⁹

At the same time, the impulse to intervene to stop armed conflict already begun may be having the opposite effect. As the televised consequences of civil-war violence

⁷ The persistence of Cold-War thinking in this label is nicely dissected by Pinar Bilgin and Adam David Morton in "Historicising representations of 'failed states': beyond the cold-war annexation of the social sciences?" *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2002): 55-80.

⁸ See Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Press, 1995).

⁹ Martin Edmonds and Greg Mills, "Niger starves to death amid aid policy confusion," *Financial Times* (August 5, 2005).

provoke international efforts to negotiate their end,¹⁰ while increasingly successful in that goal, the neglect of the actual causes of the war and the kinds of states that could be sustainable places an overpowering burden on the implementation of the political settlement negotiated. When combined with international insistence at the same time on settling debt arrears, holding early elections, protecting minority rights, and creating an open market economy and democratic government, all with only brief and insufficient international assistance, these negotiated compromises are producing fragile states that more often than not relapse into war, as in Angola, Liberia, or Haiti, or long-term deployment of foreign troops and administrations, as in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, or Kosovo.

The International Role of States

The erosion of sovereignty in an era of liberalization and increasing globalization has been a common topic of commentary and analysis for more than 20 years. Global markets, transnational networks, international norms, and cosmopolitan values have reduced significantly the role for states and their sphere of control. If we take the concept of state failure seriously, does it say that we have reached the safe limit of that process? The negative outcomes for international order identified with state failure can be quite easily explained by the kind of state that has been produced by these globalizing forces and its neoliberal economic ideology and by the complex politics of managing the

¹⁰ Virginia Page Fortna, "Where Have All the Victories Gone? Hypotheses (and Some Preliminary Tests) on War Outcomes in Historical Perspective," (presented at the Conference on Order, Conflict, and Violence, Yale University, April/May 2004, and available at: www.yale.edu/ycias/ocvprogram)

processes of liberalization and privatization and the resulting increases in inequality within countries.¹¹

At the same time, however, the current international order depends increasingly on states. Managing economic globalization actually requires far greater governmental capacity than do protected economies, for the flexible adjustments to the volatility and unpredictability of global capital and trade, the growth and welfare consequences, and the sovereign guarantees required by foreign investors and creditors.¹² The strengthening of international normative regimes and the growth in transnational organizations and networks aimed at their enforcement have also increased the demands and expectations on governments as “duty bearers” of these international commitments and norms. The organizations of the international system, moreover, are still based on states, and the current trend, led by American “new sovereigntists,”¹³ reinforces that emphasis by working actively to dismantle the solutions of liberal institutionalists and the belief in international institutions, regulation, and multilateral cooperation to provide global public goods, including security. Yet while states have less capacity to satisfy these growing external expectations, they face conditions that increasingly cannot be managed by states alone, no matter how effective and legitimate they are, but which require regional or global action.¹⁴

Taking States Seriously

¹¹ Branko Milanovic, “Can We Discern the Effect of Globalization on Income Distribution? Evidence from Household Surveys” (World Bank, Development Research Group, 22 September 2003).

¹² For example, Dani Rodrik, “Why Do More Open Economies Have Bigger Governments?” *Journal of Political Economy* vol. 106, no. 5 (October 1998).

¹³ Peter J. Spiro, “The New Sovereigntists: American Exceptionalism and Its False Prophets,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 79, no. 6 (November/December 2000): 9-15.

¹⁴ See the recommendation for a new grant fund for global public goods, for example, in Nancy Birdsall, Devesh Kapur, et al. “The Hardest Job in the World: Five Crucial Tasks for the New President of the World Bank,” Center for Global Development, June 1, 2005 (www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/2868/)

State failure, in general and in specifics, is a genuine problem, as the residents of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, of Darfur, Sudan, in 2002-2005, or of Liberia and Haiti since the early 1990s, can speak about eloquently. The *concept* of state failure, however, is a political agenda that misidentifies the problem: trying to place full responsibility on individual states for tasks that require regional and international cooperation while insisting on ever faster reform of domestic economic and political institutions to satisfy a normative conception of the state that is not suited to those tasks and cannot, in any case, be created overnight without enormous turmoil and conflict. The remedies currently promoted simply reinforce this dilemma.

As with the concept itself, the remedies are also provoking a reaction. Influential scholars at Stanford University now urge “neotrusteeships” or “shared sovereignty” where states accept their failures and agree to hand over, in whole or in part, their management to foreigners.¹⁵ Citizens in poor countries facing long-term structural unemployment, stagnant incomes, and pervasive insecurity from violent crime and unresponsive police say that given a choice, social justice should take priority over democracy.¹⁶ Many experts are reviving the old idea, long discredited, that economic growth requires strong (read: repressive) states first. Even strong, healthy governments are looking to the military to increase the “effectiveness” of diplomacy and emergency response.

We cannot afford to abandon states or democracy. The seriousness of the problem requires taking states seriously, including their essential role for international order. This

¹⁵ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Neo-trusteeship and the Problem of Weak States,” *International Security* 28:4 (Spring 2004): 5-43, and Stephen D. Krasner, “The Case for Shared Sovereignty,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 16, no. 1 (January 2005): 69-83.

¹⁶ See, for example, UNDP, *The State of Democracy in Latin America* (Santiago, Chile: United Nations Development Programme, 2004).

requires a realistic assessment of what governments, particularly in poor countries, can be expected to do under current international conditions; a set of assistance policies and conditions that address the actual causes of specific failures of international concern, including current assistance policies; and a public discussion about where effective and legitimate responsibility should lie for each such consequence.