Are Failing and Failed States a Post-Cold War Phenomenon?

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As early as 1651, political theorists, such as Hobbes, warned that in societies where government fails and no laws exist, there would be "a coercive Power to tye [sic] their hands from rapine, and revenge" that would doom their citizens to "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" lives marked by "continual fear, and danger of violent death" (Hobbes, 2003 [1651], p. 89). Is the phenomenon of the failed state, in vogue with security analysts and political scientists alike since the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion, an expression of the Risorgimento of Hobbesian fears? Or, are failed states, to which academic literature includes examples as varied as Afghanistan, DR Congo, Myanmar, and Somalia (François & Sud, 2006), really a unique new challenge for the post-bipolar era? Since the end of the Cold War, debates over international order and threats to security have changed in nature, and so has their lexicon. Where hazards were once identified as coming from "tyrannical rogue states", post-1989 challenges are seen as originating in various "arcs of instability" composed of "weak or collapsing states" (Ignatie , 2002, p. 114; Ayson, 2007). The 21st Century's benighted states are "un-governed, under-governed or mis-governed" (Lamb, p. 15) dysfunctional societies, where global threats such as terrorist breeding grounds and transnational crime are present. The real question is, however, to what extent is the concept of failed and failing states, and their underlying assumptions and implications, the product of the politics of language and "a political agenda of security-concerned Western powers" (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 32). By first defining the concept of failed states, then scrutinizing its political implications and the extent to which the idea is politicized, and finally considering its relevance in the contemporary world, this essay will argue that the discrepancy between these ideas and their meaning for the multipolar world is minimal, and they do not merely represent a taxonomical-linguistic issue. Instead, this terminology is seen as a logical and valid product of a changed world, a world where the Westphalian model of international politics, such as the interactions between equally sovereign states, presents an unrealistic conception of insecurity.

Defining Failed States

The 'basic unit' of evaluation concerning state failure is how the state is defined and understood, as this determines how failure is defined. Broadly speaking, the modern paradigm is marked by two conceptions of the state, one 'thin' and one 'thick'. The notion of the 'thin', or neo-Machiavellian, state focuses on the coercive-regulative aspects of government, as defined by Weber. Definitions stemming from the Weberian school focus on the state's success in terms of its consolidation of the monopoly of violence. Subsequently, the use of force is seen as the basic element of a functioning state, for which all other conditions such as respect for human rights, and the delivery of social services will depend (Ignatie, 2002, p. 112). Thus, a state is successful insofar as it "upholds a claim on the "monopoly" of the "legitimate" use of violence in the enforcement of its order" (Weber, 1980 [1921], p. 30). In this understanding, territories where power is primarily wielded illegitimately by warlords or kleptocrats are seen as failed states. The 'thick' conception is contractarian in nature and based on the Hobbesian-Lockean understanding of the state as a "neutral umpire" that protects lives, liberty, and the property of those within its territory (Locke, 1988 [1689], p. 212). Proponents of this conception see the monopoly of violence as an important aspect of state legitimacy, but argue that additional factors, such as an essential respect for human rights need to be included. For them, state failure has nothing to do with "an anomalous response to some sort of irregular or periodic stress" (Eisenstadt, Abitbol & Chazan, 1988, p. 236) and the associated interruption of legitimacy, but has much more to do with the state's

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collapse in basic function. The absolute threshold of collapse is defined, then, through a threefold proviso: the loss of sovereignty, the end of the state as "a tangible organization of decision-making" (Dawisha & Zartman, 1988, p. 7), and the collapse of the state as the "security guarantor" for its citizens, and the citizens of other nations (Zartman, 1995, p. 5).

Politicized Language?

Defining states in thick or thin terms has vast implications on how the threat is perceived, and thus, how it should be dealt with. Labeling states as having 'failed' is considered to be highly controversial because it makes them a candidate for internal intervention and preventive military invasions. Indeed, the idea that a state can be successful or unsuccessful in adhering to a particular set of principles is vaguely reminiscent of the colonial preoccupations in the 20th century, when state failure was a pretext for great power interventions. Belgian colonials, for example, justified their colonization of the resource-rich Congo by claiming that "the indigenous peoples had failed at self-governing themselves and establishing [Christian] civilization" and that its intervention was merely a humanitarian matter of "alleviating these throes" (Clark, 1964, p. 136). Quite similarly, colonial powers have often intervened in the Pacific to quell social disorder, "simply because it threatened their security and trade interests" (Dor, 2000). In 1893, British intervention in the Solomon Islands served "to curtail what we would now call transnational crime, especially blackbirding", and more importantly, to "ensure that no other imperial power established a presence there" (Wainwright, 2003, p. 19). Though, it can be argued that the Solomon Islands, and their "collapsed, institutions", "paralyzed government", "simmering ethnic tensions", and "social malaise" (Nguyen, 2005, p. 2) came close to what could now be considered a failing state, it is beyond doubt that the British Empire's intervention "was concerned with more than just some local outlaws à la Harold Keke that terrorized the region" (Wainwright, 2003, p. 487). It should be no surprise that those with a skeptical view on the contemporary failed state debate consider its rhetoric to be the reflection of an ethnocentric political agenda, with the wider purpose of reforming developing countries, so as to adhere to the worldview of hegemonic states (Boos & Jennings, 2005, p. 394) or even to "demonize the other as a pretext for intervention" (Adibe, 1994, p. 492). Some go even further in asserting that "the idea of failed states…and Western anxieties over 'new security threats since 9/11…are political constructions" and "an example of threat inflation" (Thrall & Cramer, 2009, p. 10). This reductionist approach to the failed states debate sees the concept itself as analytically void, and at most, a vehicle to legitimize its policy implications for interventionist hegemons.

Such a stance, however, displays an essentially flawed understanding. First, by assuming that malevolent threat-exaggeration and militarized response dominate the majority of the debate, it gravely misinterprets the goals and purposes of securitization (Münkler, 2004, p. 61). For states in a capitalist, multipolar, and post-imperial world, security is not so much about military presence as it is about regional stability and trade facilitation. Violent conflict in "declining states" (Vayrynen, 2000, p. 43), even on the local level, most likely is not the optimal situation for any actors. Second, they ultimately seem to value the importance of sovereignty over the well being of citizens, while realities suggest a different prioritization. Robert Jackson's thesis on the 'sovereignty game' shows the danger of considering sovereignty as the main variable, by pointing out that the populations of some states which "lack the ability to meaningfully function or provide public services, including order" can live under 'negative sovereignty' whereby the de jure sovereignty provides "legal freedom from outside interference", even in cases of gross human rights abuses (Jackson, 1990, p. 1; p. 30; p. 74). He notes that since the 1960s, new and weak "quasi states have been incorporated into the international community" based on norms of anti-colonialism, self-determination, and egalitarianism, despite being "juridical more than empirical entities" (p.5). The resulting 'negative sovereignty game' allows these states to enjoy an "unqualified right to exist and high prospects for survival despite their domestic disorganization and illegitimacy" (p.24) only because of this "uncritical and widespread faith in self-determination or equal sovereignty" (p.10).

Ultimately, the primary concern that arises from this, for both the well-being of citizens and the international community, is that these societies are identified as being dysfunctional, so that adequate remedies can be proposed. Though intervention is amongst these remedies, it is most likely a last resort, rather than a preferred option. Examples of multilateral international policy in recent years, such as the Security Council's affirmation of the Responsibility-to-Protect principle[1] and its recent recall of that principle in the debates over a Libyan no-fly zone[2], indicate that state failure is increasingly accepted and is not a priori seen as a merely political construction by

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intervention-savvy states. There also appears to be a consensus that failing states present significant threats to the international community and must, at least, be closely monitored, as illustrated by Robert Cooper's poignant assertion that "the Roman Empire, was not brought to fall by the well -organized Persian Empire… but [by] the Barbarians"(Cooper, 2004, p. 68).

Failed States in the Post-Cold War World

Though, to what extent do the new Barbarians present different threats than their Cold War predecessors? Also, do such threats justify utilizing a strong discourse with regard to failed states? The last two decades have seen unprecedented violence of a new nature in the former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia, East-Timor, DR Congo, and all horribly illustrate the 'instability breeds instability' maxim. Vicious circles of violence, impoverishment, chaos, and lawlessness have allowed brutal civil wars to break out and continue, as well as providing a lawless environment in which international criminals and terrorist organizations can gain a foothold. It could be argued, however, that such calamities are ubiquitous in human history and have also marked the Cold War era proxy wars in Afghanistan, Angola, Korea, and Vietnam. After all, have not all post-WWII conflicts been marked by civil strife, government breakdown, and economic collapse?

[1] Refer to UN Security Council Resolution 1674 (S/RES/1674, 2006)
[2] Refer to UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (S/RES/1973, 2011)

Though it may be true that this phenomenon, in a broad sense, has been part of the political reality for as long as the international system of states has existed (Fraenkel, 2006, p. 138), modern states that descend into violence and anarchy are much different. Their threat goes "way beyond [merely] imperiling their own citizens and threatening their neighbors through refugee flows, political instability and random warfare" (Ignatie , 2002) because the very nature of conflict has fundamentally changed in the past two decades. First, state capacity and authority have been eroded by a variety of globalization-related phenomena. Neoliberal forces have reduced state capacity in already fragile and contested societies to an exponentially lower level, so that in some cases the "evaporated Gewaltmonopol" (Vayrynen, 2000, p. 44) is superseded "by a growing privatization of violence" brandished "by a multiplicity of types of fighting units both public and private, state and non-state, or some kind of mixture" (Kaldor, 2006, p. 97). Traditional approaches to social, economic, and order breakdowns have been forced to evolve, and this evolution can be "understood in terms of this global dislocation" (Kaldor, 2006, p. 73). Whereas before, these states only spawned local insecurity, their weakness now creates problems for others, even in faraway states, whose trade and security are at risk (Helman & Ratner, 1993, p. 3). Conflicts in East-Timor or Burma, for example, have always been plagued by the lack of a viable post-colonial state legacy and flawed inter-ethnic arrangements. However, at the zenith of the superpower rivalry, these issues were either dealt with on an international level as part of a strategic power struggle over spheres of influence, or not dealt with because they were "morally [and strategically] corrosive" to the bipolar equilibrium (Nguyen, 2005, p. 2). At the same time, declining superpower support for these states has undermined their integrity, which has lead to a multiplication of threats. From that vantage point, the contemporary lack of such deep, binary antagonism on the international stage provides a unique opportunity for multilateral action in support of development.

This is the crux of the argument. The notion of failed states is not Manichaean, rather, it remains relative, and at times incoherent. Though, the only reason it can exist and flourish academically and be an important consideration in global security is because new realities permit it to do so. In theory, the concept of state failure, as constructed through academic and policy discourse, undermines the "ontological assumptions of international order premised upon bounded, viable, rational states" (Newman, 2009, p. 421). However, it is precisely because of a changed international system that failed states have been allowed to "become the single most important problem for international order" (Fukuyama, 2004, p. 92). Weak and failed states, and more importantly, the threats they represent, are perceived and constructed in an international order defined by more factors than just sovereignty, territoriality, and non-intervention, and it is the recognition that these premises are insufficient which provides the justification for the concept of failed states. As Krasner points out, "reality never has confirmed this [Westphalian] ideal type" (Krasner, 2001, p. 42), but the World Wars and Cold War have permitted it to persist despite its "anachronistic relationship with reality" (p.38). For over a century, the "prevailing norms of international law, foreign policy, diplomacy and multilateralism" have upheld the "statist, pluralist ontology" of the Westphalian model

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(Newman, 2009, p. 422). The implosion of the Soviet Union and demise of the bipolar world, compounded by increasing global connectedness, have created a world where 'old' conceptions of threats are simply inadequate and not sustainable.

In conclusion, as security threats have altered from regional instability caused by 'rogue states', to overarching security concerns which can come from non-state actors and state-actors alike, actors in the international arena have been urged to shift their attention towards the causes of these menaces – dysfunctional societies (Rotberg, 2002, p. 27). The fact that scholars and analysts have drawn attention to them by labeling them as 'weak' or 'failed' states is, in that respect, only secondary (Hamre & Sullivan, 2002, p. 96). As noted above, however, these changes imply that a system of international security cannot solely rely upon harmonious relationships between sovereign states anymore. Traditional assumptions of states as viable, autonomous agents are non-operational, and conventional causal relationships in terms of the domestic and the international are blurred. To neutralize any peril and avoid a 21st century equivalent of the Munich agreement and the appeasement it represents, the post-Cold War international community must address issues which affect relations between state actors, as well as issues which can affect the causes of transnational aggression, even those issues which are traditionally in the sphere of the domestic, including standards of governance. As such, the changed reality does not only justify the underlying assumptions of the failed state concept, but also its implications.

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