

State Weakness: Seen From Another Perspective



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David Sogge

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David Sogge is a researcher at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. He works as an independent analyst specialising in assistance and development policies and has vast professional and research experience on Africa. He is the author of *Compassion and Calculation. The Business of Private Foreign Aid* (1996) and *Give and Take. What's the Matter with Foreign Aid?* (2002), as well as numerous articles and reports.

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Goya, 5-7, Pasaje 2º. 28001 Madrid – SPAIN

Tel.: +34 912 44 47 40 – Fax: +34 912 44 47 41

Email: fride@fride.org

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Looking at the problem:

- At stake in debates about state failure is the definition of what states should be, in whose interest they should function, and thus *for whom* they fail or succeed.
- Common assessments of state weakness – emphasizing corrupt leaders and primitive hatreds – are unhelpful as they consider symptoms more than causes.
- Most official responses aim merely to contain, not resolve fundamental problems.
- A better means of understanding state fragility and what must be done to reverse it is to pay attention to global forces. These encompass the upward and outward migration of political powers and the influence of powerful incentives from abroad on elites (to the neglect of citizens and their real cause for grievance at the domestic level).

Ways forward:

- Widen and sharpen lenses used for looking at state weakness, especially focusing on critical links between territorial and global politics.
- Concentrate efforts on the system of incentives available to leaders of fragile states– from illicit pay-offs to military goods and services to offshore banks and tax paradises – driven by the West’s own laws and practices.
- Self-regulation, ‘private governance’ and ‘soft law’ for transnational business networks are unpromising unless they result in tough, enforceable laws.
- Take democracy and human rights seriously, not just as war cries justifying military attack, but as vital long-term processes led by internal movements that need respect and as a means to build political and social contracts between citizens and their states.

*‘Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business’.*¹

Out in the backwaters of empire, a new spectre has begun to haunt the West: the failing state. Among American geo-strategists, fear has risen acutely. In its *National Security Strategy* of 2002, the White House held that ‘America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.’ The US National Intelligence Council, reflecting the consensus of top spy mandarins, sees an approaching ‘perfect storm’ of conflict in certain regions facilitated by ‘the continued prevalence of troubled and institutionally weak states’ that yield ‘expanses of territory and populations devoid of effective governmental control. Such territories can become sanctuaries for transnational terrorists (such as al-Qa’ida in Afghanistan) or for criminals and drug cartels (such as in Colombia).’ In conclusion, the American spymasters predict a world in 2020 beset by a ‘pervasive sense of insecurity’.²

Across the Atlantic, political elites seem similarly taken aback. According to the European Union’s official *Security Strategy*, issued in 2003, state failure is among Europe’s five ‘key threats’. France’s Economic Council for Defence echoed these fears, stating: ‘there are no more threats to our borders’ but now ‘no borders to our threats’.³

In short, a new menace has emerged, filling the gap left by the former Soviet Bloc. However, this is a different kind of barbarism. Lurking in back streets of Mogadishu or tribal areas of Pakistan, the barbarians may be far away, but thanks to low-cost telecommunications and porous national borders, they are effectively at the gates.

¹ Michael A. Ledeen, in Goldberg 2002.

² U.S. National Intelligence Council 2004, p. 14.

³ Le Conseil Economique de la Défense, 2004, *Présentation et programme de travail 2004-2005*. www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/ced/
Thanks to Susan George for this reference.

Under a variety of terms - weak states, fragile states, states in crisis, countries at risk of instability and low-income countries under pressure - the idea of state failure has become the subject of much attention. An ever-increasing flow of research and proposals for action is being generated by think-tanks in the West, including the foreign aid system, philanthropic foundations, academic research units and centres for military and security studies.

In the marketplace of ideas, notions of state failure have expanded their share among consumers, including key consumers in the Pentagon, NATO, Brussels and the United Nations Secretariat. Yet the idea is not selling well in the non-Western places to which it refers. That is noteworthy. After all, citizens of those places have for decades protested and fought to end their countries' bad governance, poor services and public disorder — protests that had previously provoked only a shrug of shoulders, if not active discouragement among Western powers.

In much of today's discussions about failing states, telltale undertones of Western supremacy and condescension can be detected. Imperial intervention has returned as a fashionable idea. However, it is usually predicated by adjectives like 'slight' or 'benign' and only applauded if Western powers do the intervening. Some observers openly advocate the revival of colonial rule. Much of this talk is patently reactionary, but it is drawing attention to real and fundamental problems in non-Western places: polarised and feeble economies, precarious lives, social injustice, deficits in democracy, crippled public services, corrupted justice systems, criminal violence and war.

Why do such conditions emerge? Why they are continually reproduced? Do states fall or are they pushed? Exploring such questions may suggest ways to shift the terms of the debate in positive directions. As an idea with serious consequences — such as intrusive mandates for military establishments — it merits attention and interpretation.⁴

⁴ Ideas matter because they can constitute interests. If the interests underlying them attract a sufficient coalition of powerful actors, then they can become real and take root. A prominent theorist of

What's at stake?

At the heart of talk about state failure is the definition of what states should be, in whose interest they should function, and thus *for whom* they fail or succeed. Should states exist chiefly to promote globalisation's winners and to police its losers? Or should they be tasked mainly with ensuring better life-chances for all citizens? At present, the first proposition has the upper hand. Most Western geo-strategists hold that, above all else, Western states have responsibilities in defence of the West and its interests; only if such tasks are being fulfilled may those states look homeward.

Also at stake is the power to enforce rules of adherence to the world order. Such rules assign ranks and privileges, set agendas, define problems and furnish the solutions. They are rarely questioned, as they are equivalent to "common sense"; and whoever neglects or defies the rules is liable to be punished. These rules give their backers enormous ideological leverage, in line with an observation that has stood the test of time: '*The definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power.*'⁵

Washington's ideological powers include the self-assigned task of selecting some states and excluding others from acceptable world society. An example of such an imperial judgement appeared in a 1998 *Foreign Affairs* article signed by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. For her government, the world's nations could be assigned to one of four categories: full members of the international system; those in transition, seeking to participate more fully; those too weak, poor, or mired in conflict to participate in a meaningful way; and those that reject the very rules and precepts upon which the system is based.⁶

international politics, Alexander Wendt, argues that we should 'begin our theorizing about international politics with the distribution of ideas, and especially culture, in the system, and then bring in material forces, rather than the other way around. The importance of this ultimately lies in perceived possibilities for social change.' (Wendt 1999, p. 371).

⁵ Schattschneider 1960, p. 68.

⁶ Cited in Guyatt 2000, p. 122.

'Rogue' or 'outlaw' states — North Korea, Syria, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Iran under the Mullahs—fall into the last category. Since then, however, US leaders have simplified matters even further, insisting that the political world consists of only two kinds of countries: those that cooperate with the US and those that do not — in short, friend and foe. For today's ideologists of empires, a notion of enemies is essential.

For the EU, policies intended to shore up governance and security in faraway, poor countries remain conflated with policies to promote the security of Europe itself.⁷ Some member countries have tried to keep the issues clear and distinct, but as yet without much success. Ultimately, Europe's main aid and security approaches are subordinate to those advanced by Washington.

International politics since 1945 had seen some progressive developments: multilateral adherence to some universal rules, including respect for self-determination, sovereign autonomy and collective self-esteem. However, today's talk about failing states puts those achievements into question. It likens foreign lands to open terrains, inviting entrance and supremacy. A failed state is yet one more risky frontier territory. Among some Americans, it can evoke a restless, "can-do" spirit of activism abroad, reminiscent of the mythologized conquest of America's West. That activism can range from the acquisition of client regimes, 'humanitarian intervention', guided 'nation-building' through to small wars. None of these really respect self-determination. For the British political scientist Mark Duffield, the designation 'failed state' implies eligibility for re-colonisation under international supervision.⁸

Also at stake are claims to profits and strategic advantages to be gained in controlling hydrocarbons,

rare minerals and other natural resources — things that awaken the animal spirits of powerful outsiders. Just which countries get the labels "weak" and "failing" can be selective. World petroleum politics illustrates this. Hydrocarbon exporters in Central Asia, North Africa and along the Gulf of Guinea show tell-tale signs of disorder, injustice, criminalisation and other signs of weakened public authority. Yet such strategically important places seldom figure prominently in official discussions about the problem.

Finally, claims to supremacy among competing bureaucratic blocs are also at stake. When disorder in non-Western countries is articulated in terms of the threat posed to the security of Western interests, military and security establishments emerge as Top Guns. However, if the focus is mainly on boosting economic growth and investment opportunities, a bloc of state-backed mercantile agents may gain the upper hand. Institutional primacy, reflected in budgets, contracts, prestige and careers, is therefore at stake.

'The problem'

What drives the idea of state failure and how did it first gain traction? Since at least the 1950s, Western scholars and geo-political policy mandarins have observed non-Western state weakness and instability, but have rarely seen it as a big threat. Cold War thinkers did not show much concern for dysfunctional states. Rather, they worried about 'strong, internally stable governments'— that is, states tending to be led by 'one-party Communist totalitarian governments.'⁹ Nightmare scenarios were chiefly about well-ordered, self-reliant and autonomous states, not weak and troubled ones.

But in the early 1990s, during a crescendo of media attention for upheavals in Haiti, Nagorno-Karabakh,

⁷ Youngs 2007.

⁸ Remarks at seminar on 'Peacebuilding Processes and State Failure Strategies' Centro de Estudos Sociais, University of Coimbra, Portugal, 31 March 2006.

⁹ Kahn and Wiener, 1967, p. 311.

Somalia and Yugoslavia, the idea of failing states began to take off. A handful of shrewd and well-placed public intellectuals on the Right, exemplified by the travel journalist and pundit Robert Kaplan, managed to attract attention. Kaplan's lurid observations about aboriginal hatreds in the Balkans and 're-primitivized man' in Africa drew huge American audiences, including people in high places. Every US embassy in Africa got copies of his 1994 article, 'The Coming Anarchy', depicting a planetary future of criminality and mayhem. President Clinton is said to have found that article 'stunning'. Kaplan's writings reportedly moved Vice President Al Gore to ask the CIA to initiate a major research effort, the 'State Failure Task Force'.¹⁰

Yet toward the end of the 1990s, the idea seemed to be losing momentum. Official concern about disorder in non-Western lands was waning and aid for them shrinking. The Clinton administration, convinced of their neo-liberal efficacy, let the IMF and World Bank steer policy on poor countries. As a presidential candidate in 2000, George Bush said, 'I don't think nation-building missions are worthwhile'. Obscure, troubled places just were not worth bothering about very much.

Then, abruptly in September 2001, America's leaders found they had been blindsided. Officials and pundits who had smugly regarded themselves as hard-nosed realists knowing exactly what was going on in the world had been caught in deeply humiliating positions. Those narratives of societies driven by their primitive compulsions and inexplicably dysfunctional states had clearly been of no help whatsoever.

What indicates state failure?

Most researchers purport to identify types, rank them and suggest explanations. A sampling of mainstream writings yields a fairly consistent number of attributes of state fragility and failure.

One mainstream view is that a state fails when it loses its exclusive control over the means of coercion. In mid-2005, a Washington DC think tank, the Fund for Peace, offered the following definition: 'A state is failing when its government is losing physical control of its territory or lacks a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Other symptoms include the erosion of authority to make collective decisions, an inability to provide reasonable public services, and the loss of the capacity to interact in formal relations with other states as a full member of the international community'.¹¹ In short, the state and reigning political class lose legitimacy and authority.

Documents like the US *National Security Strategy* concentrate not so much on indicators of failing states as on the negative consequences that flow from them: 'poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.' State failure in Africa is threatening because local civil wars may spread regionally, and badly-policed borders may permit terror groups to operate freely. The paradigm pivots on the equation: dangerous classes in unstable settings add up to threats to Western security.

In conventional narratives, states break down because of the wickedness of national politicians. They are corrupt and greedy; they are the ones who have 'consciously sucked state competencies dry.' The American academic Robert Rotberg is typical in concluding: 'State failure is man-made, not merely accidental nor – fundamentally – caused geographically, environmentally or externally. Leadership decisions and leadership failures have destroyed states and continue to weaken the fragile polities that operate on the cusp of failure'.¹² Claims that breakdowns can stem from social injustice and exclusion are dismissed. In 1999, the World Bank mounted a major two-year research project on the Economics of Civil Wars, Crime and Violence. In widely-cited findings, it concluded that social injustice

¹⁰ Besteman 2005, p. 239.

¹¹ Fund For Peace 2005.

¹² Rotberg 2002, p. 93.

(‘grievance’) doesn’t explain civil wars; rather, the main culprits are bad people and their criminal behaviour (‘greed’).¹³

Mainstream analyses of political disorder rely on number-crunching to establish statistical correlations among variables drawn from data sets of stylised facts like ‘party fractionalization’ or ‘freedom’ built on expert opinion. The results are hardly unambiguous. For example, the State Failure Task Force, a consortium of US academics commissioned in 1994 by the Central Intelligence Agency, reached the unsurprising conclusion that risks of state failure are higher where living standards are low and where there’s violent conflict next door. The *Fragile State Strategy* of USAID concludes that government fragility results from ‘governing arrangements that lack effectiveness and legitimacy’.¹⁴ It is difficult to imagine findings that could be more circular.

However, other research takes us further, simply by using other variables. A study by the Washington DC-based Fund for Peace emphasizes indicators of social disparities and abuse of human rights. It concludes: ‘Among the 12 indicators we use, two consistently rank near the top. Uneven development is high in almost all the states in the index, suggesting that inequality within states — and not merely poverty — increases instability. Criminalisation or delegitimation of the state, which occurs when state institutions are regarded as corrupt, illegal, or ineffective, also figured prominently’.¹⁵

Conclusions about ‘the problem’

Conventional accounts blame the usual suspects: despotic and greedy leaders. More subtle versions emphasise social divisions. But in the end, failing states have only themselves to blame for their misfortunes. The problem is ‘out there’, having little or nothing to do with dominant powers or the world

system they run. Talk of failing states persists because a host of powerful and well-funded Western interests — geo-strategists, military establishments, development agencies and humanitarian NGOs — find it a highly useful banner behind which to rally.

Problems with ‘the problem’

For the intended audiences — foreign policy directors, military chieftains and pundits who shape the perspectives of policy elites — accounts of the problem in the ways just sketched are evidently taken with great seriousness. Are mainstream versions of the problem adequate? From a perspective of emancipatory global politics, there is reason to think they are not.

Prejudicial explanations

Mainstream talk avoids essential matters of state purposes and politics. It takes for granted an ideal type preferred by Western powers. The American political scientist Susan Woodward finds that ‘the entire literature on fragile or failed states assumes a particular normative model of the state’ that meets requirements of market systems and norms of ‘responsibility’, as determined by dominant powers. These requirements can be quite specific. States in targeted countries must enact laws favouring foreign interests, including the selling-off of public utilities to private bidders. That is, powerful outsiders are determining rules and standards of state performance. They set the bar high — far higher than what Western states faced at comparable periods in their histories.

As Woodward further points out, the ‘consensus model’ of the state is usually posed in the technically sanitized terms of development and security policy, not in terms of clashing interests and the need to negotiate among them.¹⁶ Removed from the messy matter of politics, the

¹³ See: <http://www.worldbank.org/research/conflict/papers/civilconflict.htm>.

¹⁴ U.S. Agency for International Development 2005, p. 5.

¹⁵ Foreign Policy & Fund For Peace 2005.

¹⁶ Woodward 2005, p. 5.

model is largely irrelevant to understanding the main issues – what makes states weak, and what would really be required for them to grow stronger.

A look into the gallery of leading rogues in troubled countries makes the greedy-and-corrupt-leader explanation seem persuasive. Yet if this voluntarist, ‘big man’ account of history was the only version to go by, we would never learn how such kleptocratic dictators, kings, sheiks and sultans emerged. Neither would we learn why, from Central America to the Middle East to Central Africa, Western powers kept them in the saddle.

Narratives of primordial savagery and irrationality, and thus of the need for civilized powers to liberate non-Western peoples from erroneous beliefs, tribal feuding and despotic rulers, go back to the Spanish conquistadors in Latin America in the 16th century and Europe’s imperial scramble for Africa and Afghanistan in the 19th century. In paying attention to observers like Kaplan, media gatekeepers have pandered to such tenacious prejudices.

Yet rarely have the media exposed such analyses as sophomoric, if not simply crackpot.¹⁷ The media has overlooked, for example, massive evidence that ‘ethnic’ violence stemmed not from ‘age-old fury’ of the Kaplan school, but from calculated political stratagems. In Sudan, the US and Israel began backing rebel armies in the 1960s; in Mozambique and Angola, the US encouraged insurgencies backed by apartheid South Africa; in South Africa itself, a variety of Western interests promoted Chief Buthelezi and his violent Inkatha movement against Nelson Mandela’s ANC; in Rwanda, a small political cabal enjoying ties with French elites incited the 1994 pogroms. As for those corrupt and greedy despots, accounts of who provided their guns, trained gunmen and secret banking services sooner or later come to the surface. Yet such grim histories of outside intervention are regularly overlooked in favour of the ‘greed’, ‘anarchy’ and ‘re-primitivized man’ lines of argument.

¹⁷ See Besteman 2005.

How robust were states in the first place?

In Africa, the colonial state emerged only after an ‘unnatural birth’ at a rapid tempo, usually at the point of a gun. Colonialism dispensed with pre-colonial states almost everywhere and set about building up cheap and expedient apparatuses of domination. There was no time for organic growth of formal state institutions.¹⁸ Bureaucratic power did not extend much beyond administrative outposts. Supervising extraction of raw materials, taxes and labour on behalf of foreign elites was the state’s core business.

Lacking effectiveness and legitimacy, the colonial state would hardly qualify as robust according to today’s criteria. Legitimacy was merely assumed, never built or tested through public politics. Colonial rulers groomed and paid local potentates and their so-called ‘traditional authorities’. Popular resistance to the colonial state — mainly in passive forms such as tax avoidance, flight, smuggling, sabotage and irreverent songs and jokes in local languages — developed from an early hour, becoming honourable traditions in many places.

In the last decades of colonial rule in Africa, political activism did gain momentum as political parties emerged. However, colonial powers forcefully curtailed most public politics. In the post-colony state, those traditions of anti-politics were carried forward. Left-leaning and secular parties (such as in Guatemala, Iran and Sudan in the 1950s) were rapidly decapitated and repressed by juntas and monarchs acceptable to Western interests. In the Cold War, the risks of leftwing nationalism were judged to be too high to allow space for public, competitive politics. Hence those civil spaces were closed down, making politics a dead letter.

States as targets for demolition

Around 1980, after fifty years in the making, a counter-revolution against Keynesian economic policy rose to the fore in Washington and London. A

¹⁸ Moore 2001.

campaign began to vilify *most* governments, not just the communist ones. Public sectors were no longer seen as the solution, but the problem. States were held to have neither capacity nor legitimacy to steer economies. Such tasks were best left to outsiders and their local private associates. A coalition of interests led by the World Bank and IMF (hitherto ardent backers of state-led growth) became leading agents of market-led dogmas.

Downsizing the state and re-engineering governance became key Western aims. For public services in low-income countries this meant serious cutbacks: the elimination or reduction of state subsidies for food, medicines and social protection, the privatisation of state assets, a reduction in state payrolls, mainly of education and health staff. Outside the state, some branches of civil society were asked to substitute for public sector agencies, providing social services at no cost to public treasuries, encouraged by the motto, "let the charities fill the gap".

Economic collapse, disorder and state breakdown have also been planned and executed in cold blood. Western powers have long pursued their aims through 'regime change'. They have groomed and protected certain political leaders and assassinated others. In the 1980s they launched full-scale 'Rollback' wars in southern Africa and Central America. They bullied political actors from Khartoum to Jakarta. In disintegrating Afghanistan, the US backed Islamic militants against a Soviet-supported regime. In most of these interventions, the aim was to weaken and eventually overturn the governments. Programmes of economic reform were deployed for regime change. Jeffrey Sachs, the American mastermind of economic 'shock therapy' for Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, has admitted that the chief purposes of Washington's economic remedies were not 'economic' but 'strategic' — that is, a geopolitical pursuit of war by other means.¹⁹ In other words the promotion of state fragility has sometimes been an effective — if very short-sighted — strategy.

¹⁹ BBC *Hardtalk*, 22 January 2003.

Acute state breakdown is often accompanied by violence. Analysis of case studies led the Cambridge economist Valpy FitzGerald to identify three key turning-points:

- "First, the sudden widening of disparities in income or wealth within a society, which can arise both from the impoverishment of some groups or the enrichment of others. [...]"
- Second, an increase in uncertainty as to the economic prospects of dominant or subordinate groups, or both, in terms of real incomes and asset ownership, including access to common resources, which generates collective insecurity. [...]"
- Third, the weakening of the economic capacity of the state to provide public goods, which undermines the legitimacy of the existing administrative system. [...]" In consequence, the 'social contract' no longer receives wide support, and allegiance is transferred to those actors (ranging from security companies to warlords) who can apparently fulfil more limited 'group contracts'."²⁰

All of these turning points can be identified in pre-crisis ex-Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Haiti. In places lacking a 'political contract' between states and citizens, rulers can usually buy off, or repress discontent. In such settings, social and economic disorder itself can become an instrument of politics.²¹ Interests converge around non-transparent systems of patronage that make disordered, weakened states useful shells for domestic and foreign elites.

Yet there are other types of disorder, not all of them signifying permanent breakdown and elite aggrandizement. In 2004-2005, for example, upheavals in impoverished Bolivia and the Kyrgyz Republic did not herald state collapse, but rather political change driven by public dissatisfaction with the old order. From a worldwide perspective, such

²⁰ FitzGerald 1999, p. 59.

²¹ Chabal and Daloz, 1999.

episodes are perfectly normal. Attempts to frustrate them or maintain a status quo may therefore be doomed, or even perverse.

How enabling or disabling is the global setting?

Most conventional accounts of failing states neglect their global settings. Yet a view of states as self-contained islands, from which outside forces are largely excluded, does not match reality. For in much of Africa and parts of Latin America and Asia, key instruments of sovereign authority have effectively been transferred abroad. Powers over fiscal and monetary policy have been locked away from local influence through binding international agreements. Governments may ratify their budgets only after approval in Washington DC. Today's typical African polity is, according to some scholars, 'neither African nor state'.²²

For governing elites, opportunities for self-enrichment and acquisition of means of repression have never been greater, and the risks lower, than those offered by today's global setting. That environment includes:

- Widespread access to under-regulated, private and secret banking services that facilitate looting of public assets, tax evasion/avoidance, money laundering and other forms of capital flight;
- Sovereignty as a commodity for sale to highest bidders (think of tax paradises, export-processing zones, cut-rate licensing of ships, dumping of dangerous waste, rights to offshore and underwater resources, etc.) actively encouraged by Western governments and international financial institutions;
- Feeble international control over booming markets for arms and military services, worsened by state industrial subsidies and by state breakdown (especially in former eastern bloc lands);
- Corporate resistance to mandatory regulation of revenues gained from petroleum, diamonds, tropical hardwoods and other resources;

These trends have developed on a scale and with a degree of freedom scarcely imaginable before the advent of market fundamentalism. Indeed, many have been given a strong push by that big policy formula, emerging in the climate of loosened and realigned public regulation.

What are the outcomes? One is the emergence of *rentier* regimes whose elites are focused on short term gain and survival.²³ National authorities face no strong incentives to engage with citizens as sources of revenue and of political legitimation. For material support and political backing, they look abroad. The rewards and risks on the domestic front hardly weigh up against the irresistible financial, military and political opportunities flowing from arrangements with foreign private and official agencies. Global incentive systems are thus pervasive and powerful.

Conclusions about the problem with 'the problem'

Problems such as corrupt despots, ethnic feuding and a failure to deliver public services certainly exist. However, in themselves, they don't explain why states weaken and break down. Arguing that states are fragile because they lack effectiveness and legitimacy is circular. Many non-Western states are artefacts of Western powers' penetration and domination over hundreds of years. By neglecting these histories, mainstream versions obscure the drivers of disorder and bad governance in perverse incentives promoted by powerful interest blocs and the global flows of goods, money and ideas that serve them.

²² Bayart 1999, Engelbert 1997.

²³ Moore 2001.

“Solutions”

Failing or not, states are vital for today’s hegemonic empire. Security strategists like the American conservative Philip Bobbitt may advocate market-led utopias without sovereign states, but most Western geo-strategists would shudder at the thought.²⁴ States with full juridical sovereignty under international law, as British historian of global politics Peter Gowan points out, have been key to legitimising the US hegemonic project. As systems of formal rules, states continue to serve as ‘organising centres of national capitalism’.²⁵

States not only facilitate Western economic strategies; they also police things Western interests do not like: migrants who seem to threaten Western wellbeing, goods deemed undesirable and robust socio-political movements with the power to unseat client governments. States in non-Western parts of the world are expected to cooperate as enforcers of these rules. Those unwilling to do so may find themselves re-defined as weak or failing and thus part of the problem. They then face the consequences.

Empire lite

In cases they define as refractory – a ‘rogue’ state – neo-conservatives tend to favour armed intervention, not only to change a specific regime but also, as Voltaire said about the usefulness of occasional executions, *pour encourager les autres*. Harvard Professor of National Security and Military Affairs, Stephen Rosen, puts it as follows:

“The maximum amount of force can and should be used as quickly as possible for psychological impact, to demonstrate that the empire cannot be challenged with impunity [...] We are in the business of bringing down hostile governments and creating governments favourable to us.”²⁶

²⁴ Bobbitt 2002.

²⁵ Gowan 2004, p. 297.

²⁶ Rosen, 2002.

A relevant question is *how* the US intends to bring down governments it does not like. Today, the risks are high that *overt* intervention may go wrong, and that the West will subsequently face ‘blowback’. Hence covert intervention and low-intensity war are poised for a comeback after a spell on the benches following their triumphs in savage ‘Rollback’ wars of the 1980s. Countries like Somalia and Pakistan, where politicised Islam is a ready vehicle for social movements, are clearly candidates for covert operations.

US military strategists have struggled to devise a coherent doctrine of ‘small wars’ or ‘low-intensity conflict’ since at least the 1930s. Yet, as the German political scientist Jochen Hippler observes, those doctrines fail to resolve huge contradictions: How can US-friendly ‘stability’ be promoted through destabilisation? How can viable, popularly legitimate states be built where the US clearly dominates those states?²⁷

Faced with these puzzles, some strategists and pundits call for solutions of an old-fashioned kind. After 11 September 2001, several of them called for a revival of colonial rule.²⁸ Nevertheless, calls to take up the rich man’s burden have as yet had little effect in high places. As the colonial powers realised in the last decades of their rule in Africa, *direct* imperial rule is unaffordable. Today’s preferences converge around solutions that are, for the rich and secure countries anyway, less risky and expensive than direct rule. Indeed, a guiding principle is that most risk and expense are to be borne by the targeted states themselves.

Official approaches show a range of options, from institution-building to state-building to nation-building. Most are premised on containing, not resolving problems. Many are a blend of beefed-up justice systems and policing, political re-engineering and ‘capacity building’. Official American strategy statements emphasise stronger institutions for security,

²⁷ Hippler 2006.

²⁸ Wolf 2001, Mallaby 2002, Fukuyama 2004.

law and order. US guidelines tend to read like management checklists and say almost nothing about political crises based on real grievances and how politics have to be factored in to conflict management. US proposals say nothing whatsoever about 'external drivers' such as global financial circuits.²⁹ European official analyses sometimes go beyond formal governmental arrangements; they admit the importance of real political contestation as part of 'good governance'. Yet it is far from clear that respect for internal processes and the building of political and social contracts between citizens and their states is the intention. Western agencies have spread the discourse of "participation" and "ownership", but these are chiefly meant to unify and guide how measures are to be *interpreted*, not how they are to be carried out. Where policy instruments to steer an economy have been given up and representative branches of government have been drained of any real power, it is not clear what difference public politics can make.

The humanitarian impulse

In 1928, the German political thinker and 'Crown Jurist of the Third Reich', Carl Schmitt, argued: 'The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperial expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism'.³⁰ Such acute, if cynical, reasoning has been applied with ever-increasing frequency in the twentieth century. Western military aggression is often packaged in the language of humanitarianism. US-led sanctions and the war against Iraq may have cost hundreds of thousands of lives, but humanitarian claims were made to justify them. Humanitarian agencies are recruited into what are patently military-political adventures. Hence the imperial and the humanitarian impulses are deliberately made hard to distinguish.

Agents for development face rising pressures to become agents for security. At the same time, security

services are taking on development tasks. The American military used to have only one mandate: combat. But in November 2005, with little fanfare, the Pentagon announced that 'stability operations are a core US Military mission' that will henceforth enjoy 'priority comparable to combat operations'. This recasting of US military doctrine was required to stop terrorist groups from 'setting up shop in so-called ungoverned areas, or failing states, around the world'.³¹ "Winning the peace" is now part of the military's core business. Yet as even the development and humanitarian agents know, winning on socio-political fronts is hardly a sure thing. And when soldiers get that job, all bets are off. As one US defense expert put it, 'people who are good killers tend not to be good mediators'.³²

Do the 'solutions' work?

Where an ideology of empire has laid the track, it follows that there will be horses trained to run it. Where there are governance deficits and political instability, a little probing will quickly reveal ever-spiralling crises where 'solutions', meant to resolve 'problems', are overwhelmed by yet further 'problems' in succession.

Since around 1980, market fundamentalist measures to scale back and privatise governance have been put forward as non-negotiable imperatives. Yet as even some of its former advocates now admit, outcomes of market fundamentalism have been seriously harmful: slow growth, rising unemployment, increasing inequality in income and assets³³, capital flight, and exposure to economic shocks.

³¹ Jeffrey Nadaner, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Stability Operations, quoted in Rowan Scarborough, 'Nation-building elevated' *The Washington Times*, December 14, 2005.

³² Loren Thompson, Lexington Institute in Arlington, USA, quoted in 'New military goals: 'win the peace' *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 December 2005.

³³ A main theme of Chua 2004.

²⁹ USAID 2005.

³⁰ Schmitt 1928 (trans. 1976), p. 53.

The cost to citizens and to public trust has been high. In the Kyrgyz Republic, where market fundamentalist 'reform' has been exceptionally intense since the early 1990s, villagers told World Bank researchers:

"Well-being is what we had in the past; we had enough money then, prices were low, health care was free, and doctors were very polite. Education for children was free too. People respected each other. There were a lot of children. Everybody had a job, wages were paid on time, nobody's rights were abused and nobody wanted to leave town [...] Poverty results in suicide, hunger, death, lack of money, lack of hope. Things are getting worse everyday. People are afraid of starvation, lack of heating, ethnic unrest. People bite one another like dogs."³⁴

On balance, outcomes for state capacities and political legitimacy have, likewise, been negative. At the behest of Western donors, public institutions have been suffocated by austere budgets, segmented incoherently into hundreds of projects, by-passed by special management units, NGOs and consulting firms, and plundered of their best managers and technicians by foreign firms and agencies.

Legacies of bad ideas

States have been further weakened by demands that they part with their money. Western policy-makers long insisted that low-income countries, before anything else, repay their foreign debt – although strategic possessions like Iraq and Afghanistan have been exempted. Second, they must set aside large amounts of national savings in offshore (dollar) reserves, effectively subsidizing rich countries. That drain on public revenues can be crippling. It discourages private investment and vital investment in the public infrastructure that investors require.

Western imperatives divest states of their money in other ways. Poor countries typically depend on trade taxes for a quarter to a third of their revenue. Yet

international financial institutions have compelled them to shift tax burdens from external trade to internal consumption, mainly by imposition of a Value Added Tax. Such measures were not supposed to leave governments any worse off in fiscal terms, but they have proven to be pure swindles. Reviewing data since 1975, two IMF economists concluded in 2005 that 'low income countries [...] largely failed to recover from the revenue lost through trade reform from domestic sources.'³⁵ The poorer the country, the less revenue its government recovered.

Poor governments have thus been forced to rely even more on donors for loans, grants and the policy formulas that come with them. This is hardly a promising development, since many of the donors' big ideas — as World Bank's own research has shown — are unfit for human consumption. In 2005, after decades of active and coercive promotion of agrarian exports, a major World Bank publication concluded that a 'development strategy based on agricultural commodity exports is likely to be impoverishing in the current agricultural policy environment'.³⁶ Detailed studies confirm the kinds of catastrophes that can occur where donors rule. A 1998 internal evaluation of World Bank efforts in Malawi, for example, concluded that 'the Bank's approach to Malawi ... impoverished the smallholder sector'.³⁷ Comparable outcomes are the rule elsewhere in Africa. Indeed, experts have concluded that in a typical African country, the strength of the economy is inversely proportional to the influence of the World Bank.³⁸

Governance without politics

Weak states and politics have frequently been made weaker through calculated efforts directed from Washington. Facing resistance to their structural adjustment programmes, the citadels of the foreign aid system set about in the 1980s to empower central banks and finance ministries and insulate those

³⁴ Rysakova and others 2002, p. 285.

³⁵ Baumgaard and Keen, 2005, p. 18.

³⁶ Aksoy and Beghin 2005, p. 3.

³⁷ World Bank Operations Evaluation Department 1998, p. 2.

³⁸ Havnevik and others 2008.

economic control rooms from domestic politics. This meant sidelining legislatures. Deprived of any real powers over budgets and economic policy, parliaments were allowed to determine such matters as public holidays and the choice of national anthems. Development choices were effectively removed from the public debate.

While political accountability has been oriented upward and outward, to foreign economic actors and the aid system, downward accountability has been limited largely to hollow, manipulated elections. This has weakened government legitimacy and authority, already dented by poor performance in its delivery of healthcare, education and public security. Citizens are also broadly aware of elite self-enrichment through self-dealing in the privatisation of public assets. The decline of state services and legitimacy is further undercut by reduced tax effort. In light of this, combined with rising insecurity, the political class is almost guaranteed to lose public confidence.

Such trends do not favour the emergence of open politics, let alone a sense of 'political community'. Where all political parties offer the same economic formulas, and thus differ only by ethnic affiliation or by the personalities of the 'big men' leading them, competitive politics can be unattractive and even dangerous. Organisations of 'civil society' (selectively supported from abroad) may pre-empt space for indigenous local politics. In places dominated by NGOs with no real anchoring in local life, there is talk of 'Too much civil society, too little politics'.³⁹

Frequently missing from mainstream solutions are means to stop or reverse the cumulative, self-reinforcing damage done to states and societies by powerful outsiders' intrusive and coercive practices. Economic insecurity can not only damage social trust and solidarity ('People bite one another like dogs'), but also tease out fears and resentments, ripe for political mobilisation, against state authorities and, in particular, against people of other ethnicities or

religious persuasions. It is no accident that most of the countries high on lists of fragile and failing states, such as that of the Fund for Peace/Foreign Policy (2005), have been prime targets of orthodox economic programmes.

Those programmes' catastrophic outcomes are now better documented and even acknowledged at the commanding heights of the foreign aid system that imposed them. Hence the advent of new, 'fail-safe' versions: policy with a poverty focus, policy devised in consultation with 'civil society' and thus locally 'owned', and so forth. Such shifts of accent may sometimes offer openings at the margins, but essentials of the market fundamentalist solution — economies and polities subordinated to foreign actors — are retained.⁴⁰ Self-policing according to 'soft law' by big firms and their supply chains was supposed to improve transparency, curb corruption and promote socially responsible behaviour. Unlike the Americans, some Europeans have also recently begun calling for greater light to be cast in the dark corners where big businesses and poor country elites carry on their mutually advantageous affairs. However most 'private governance' and 'soft law' answers to this, such as the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, are largely toothless.⁴¹ As a London School of Economics professor recently remarked, amidst recent catastrophes in world financial markets, 'self-regulation stands in relation to regulation the way self-importance stands in relation to importance and selfrighteousness to righteousness'.⁴²

Under consideration, then, is a continual stream of experimental 'solutions' that generate new problems, reinforce old ones, and deflect attention from the chronic, powerful drivers of state fragility at global levels. It is to those upper levels, where no one can be effectively held accountable, that much power and authority has been relocated. The effect is the further de-nationalisation of governance. Especially in fragile,

³⁹ Langohr 2004.

⁴⁰ Rodrik 2006.

⁴¹ See Vogel 2006 and Soares de Oliveira 2007.

⁴² Prof. W. Buiter, 'Self-Regulation Means No Regulation' *Financial Times* 10 April 2008.

peripheral places, the nation-state is seldom the main arena of politics. The American social scientist Saskia Sassen has cast light on these obscure but growing 'third spaces' between national and global levels of power, where transnational groupings increasingly overshadow the powers of states, both 'fragile' and 'strong'.⁴³ These range from production chains (in both licit and illicit goods and services), to specialised judicial rules, to an emergent global human rights regime, to transnational social movements. Such elements call into question the relevance of conventional notions of the nation state as the chief locus of politics, and therefore of problems and their solutions.

Conclusion

This paper has sketched the politics of an idea that, while driven by questionable intentions, refers to real matters, for the wretchedness seen in places where public order has decayed or imploded is real. Yet according to the mainstream paradigm, state failure is only incidentally a failure to make secure and improve citizen well-being; the main problem is fragile states' failures to ensure the security of Western interests. Greedy, despotic or disobedient leaders have only themselves to blame for underdevelopment and illegitimate governance. State fragility is thus a self-evident pretext for further Western trusteeship, preferably legitimized now and then by ritual elections, but enforced if necessary through regime change by force of arms. Then come further economic 'reforms', regrettably but necessarily painful — 'solutions' that usually bring on the very problems that weaken states and public order: inequality, exclusion, impoverished public sectors and illegitimate governance.

Will the idea of failing states be around in ten years' time? That will not depend on its power to explain crises and generate effective responses; this paper has argued that it is seriously flawed in both those respects. Rather, the idea's longevity will depend on its power to

keep animating coalitions among powerful diplomatic, military, financial, academic and media blocs. Yet, as it continues to license those blocs' global reach, and to mask their roles in disorder and malgovernance, the idea is unlikely to gain endorsement in the subaltern lands it purports to describe.

Talk of state fragility and failure is likely to change in tone and intensity as Western geo-strategists come to terms with other realities. One reality is the West's loss of primacy in Africa and elsewhere to Chinese and Indian interests. Another is the rising spending power of some hitherto 'fragile' mineral exporting states, from Angola to Zambia, from Ecuador to Equatorial Guinea. Terms of the discussion may change as pessimistic forecasts are proven wrong. In 2003, the UN was urged to revive its Trusteeship Council in order to take over the management of Liberia; yet that country's recovery from war has thus far disproved the need for re-colonisation.

Such shifts could give further momentum to calls for a re-think, which is this paper's main suggestion for a way forward. Lenses for looking at state weakness need to be widened and more sharply focused on critical links in complex chains of causation. A wider lens would encompass aspects such as the 'shared sovereignty' of both donors and local elites over national governance in weak states and the system of incentives directed towards leaders, driven by the West's own laws and practices. Such incentives include opportunities for gain through collaboration in illicit trade and opportunities to sequester those gains in offshore banks and tax paradises. Perspectives such as these would allow Western pundits and policy-makers to see the truth of *A Message to World Leaders* by the prestigious Royal African Society, London, amidst a crescendo of plans and promises in 2005 to spend more for Africa. The heart of that message was: 'It's not just about thinking up good things we should do to Africa — it about the bad things we should stop doing'.⁴⁴

⁴³ Sassen 2006.

⁴⁴ *A Message to World Leaders: What about the Damage We Do to Africa?*

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Under a variety of terms - weak states, fragile states, states in crisis, countries at risk of instability and low-income countries under pressure - the idea of state failure has become the subject of much attention. An ever-increasing flow of research and proposals for action is being generated by think-tanks in the West, including the foreign aid system, philanthropic foundations, academic research units and centres for military and security studies.

At the heart of talk about state failure is the definition of what states should be, in whose interest they should function, and thus *for whom* they fail or succeed. Driving today's approach is the idea that states exist chiefly to promote globalisation's winners and to police its losers. For Western geo-strategists, non-Western states have the role and duty above all else to protect the West and its interests; only if such tasks are being fulfilled may those states look homeward.

In this paper, David Sogge takes issue with that position. If everyone's security and well-being is to be safeguarded and improved, states should seek to ensure better life-chances for all citizens – a task which many proved capable of doing after the Second World War. However, in a globalized world, even strong states will not be sufficient.

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