

# Weak States and the Savage Wars of Peace

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Bombs made in Yemen. Piracy made in Somalia. War crimes made in the Congo. Fanatic insurgency made in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A parade of abominations from troubled places routinely marches across the screens of our media's global village. That attention is driving today's politics of fear, and the "solutions" that follow from those politics: endless wars and loss of civil freedoms.

Official talk of "state failure" emerged in the early 1990s as Western policy elites and opinion-formers struggled to make sense of violent upheavals in Somalia, Haiti, the Caucasus, the Balkans and Rwanda. The events of 11 September 2001 catapulted the idea into policy pre-eminence. In the United States' "National Security Strategy" of 2002, it had become an official axiom: "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones."<sup>1</sup> Policymakers across the Atlantic quickly took their cue from Washington; as of 2003, state failure became one of the five "key threats" identified in the European Union's official "Security Strategy". 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".<sup>2</sup> America's top spy mandarins, in a projection published in 2004, saw an approaching "perfect storm" of conflict in certain regions, made possible 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-Qaeda in Afghanistan) or for criminals and drug cartels (such as in Colombia)". In conclusion, the spymasters predicted a world in 2020 beset by a "pervasive sense of insecurity".<sup>3</sup>

Thus a new paradigmatic menace has been conjured up. As a powerful imaginary, it fills the place left by the former Soviet Bloc. It is another kind of barbarism, now much closer to hand. Lurking in the back streets of Mogadishu or the tribal areas of Pakistan, the barbarians may be far away, but thanks to low-cost telecommunications, cheap air travel and porous national borders, they are in effect at the gates.

## 'The Problem'

What drives the idea of state failure and how did it first gain traction? As a contemporary geopolitical concept, it seems out of keeping with the times. During the Cold War, Western strategists never worried much about dysfunctional states. Rather, they were gripped by fears of "strong, internally stable governments", that is, states tending to be led by "one-party Communist totalitarian governments".<sup>4</sup> Nightmare scenarios for Washington were about well-ordered, disciplined and autonomous nations—not weak and troubled ones.

Yet a longer view reveals old, deep-running currents in the Western imaginary of non-Western places. Narratives of primordial savagery and irrationality go back to the Conquistadors of Latin America in the sixteenth century and to Europe's scrambles for Africa and Afghanistan in the

nineteenth century. Imperial glory and material gain were the impulses of domination, but these had to be justified by more noble intentions, such as ending disorder among the “lesser breeds without the law.” Hence, it was “the White Man’s burden”, as Kipling famously expressed it, to pursue “the savage wars of peace”.

A couple of decades after decolonisation, notions of “soft” states and disordered politics began to appear among area-studies scholars, especially Africanists. Anglo-Saxon economists allied to the anti-Keynesian “counter-revolution” began to churn out studies about rent-seeking, corruption and other government practices in non-Western places—practices that were thought to nullify enterprise and economic growth.

Helping sound the alarm were a handful of shrewd and well-placed public intellectuals on the right, such as the American travel journalist and pundit Robert Kaplan. His lurid observations about “re-primitivised man” in Africa and aboriginal hatreds in the Balkans captivated many readers, including people in high places. Every US embassy in Africa got copies of his 1994 *Atlantic Monthly* article, “The Coming Anarchy”, depicting a planetary future of criminality and mayhem. President Bill Clinton is said to have found that article “stunning”. Kaplan’s writings reportedly moved Vice-President Al Gore to ask the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to set up a major research effort, the State Failure Task Force.

Yet towards the end of the 1990s, the idea of failing states lost momentum. Official concern about disorder in non-Western lands waned and aid for them shrank. The Clinton administration, convinced of their neo-liberal efficacy, let the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank steer policy on poor countries. As presidential candidate in 2000, George W. Bush said, “I don’t think nation-building missions are worthwhile.” Obscure, troubled places were just not worth bothering about.

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 attuned to exactly what was going on in the world had been caught in deeply humiliating postures. Those narratives of societies driven by primitive compulsions and of inexplicably dysfunctional states had clearly been of no help whatsoever.

### **What Is at Stake?**

When it is clear why states exist, in whose interest they should function and thus *for whom* they fail or succeed, talk about state failure can become meaningful. Should states exist chiefly to ensure better life-chances for all citizens? Or are their tasks mainly to promote globalisation’s winners and police its losers? For Western powers, the latter question has commanded most attention, especially since 2001. Most Western geostrategists answer it in the affirmative, holding that non-Western states have, above all else, responsibilities in defence of the West and its interests. Policies meant to shore up the governance and security of faraway poor countries have been conflated with policies to promote the security of rich and powerful countries.

Also at stake are claims to economic and strategic advantages 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 energy politics illustrates this. Hydrocarbon exporters in Central and West Asia and North Africa show tell-

tale signs of disorder, injustice, criminalisation and other indications of weakened public legitimacy. Yet such strategically important places seldom figure prominently in official discussions of the problem.

### **What Indicates State Failure?**

Much academic and think-tank effort has gone towards identifying types of state weakness, ranking countries and detecting indicators. As of 2009, at least thirteen frameworks for measuring and comparing state fragility were on offer.<sup>5</sup> A sampling of mainstream writings yields a fairly consistent number of attributes of state fragility and failure.

In standard perspectives, a state fails when it loses its exclusive control over the means of coercion and when it lacks the commitment and capacity to provide public goods. A major policy paper by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) expresses the current consensus among Western policy elites as follows:

States are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security and human rights of their populations.<sup>6</sup>

A few analyses acknowledge the weight of history, stressing patterns laid down over long periods by the interplay of conflicting interests. These interpretations recognise that fragility is not a mere “lifestyle choice” that can be quickly corrected under supervised therapy. However, Western strategists usually ignore such readings under prevailing mainstream optimism about the efficacy of social engineering pursued from the outside, through aid or “humanitarian intervention” via armed force. In this view of nation-building—favoured by military chieftains and consulting firms—causes of state failure are relatively easily located, being confined to the territories themselves. Particularly blameworthy are national politicians, whose corruption and greed have “consciously sucked state competencies dry”, in the words of the American academic Robert Rotberg. His thinking exemplifies conventional Western opinion: “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.”<sup>7</sup>

Mainstream analyses of political disorder rely on number-crunching to establish cross-country correlations. Data are built largely on “expert” opinion, using stylised facts like “party fractionalisation” or “freedom”. Results of these statistical exercises have been something less than spectacular. For example, the aforementioned State Failure Task Force, a big-budget consortium of US academics commissioned in 1994 by the CIA, reached the pallid conclusion that risks of state failure are higher where living standards are low and where there is violent conflict in neighbouring countries. In circular logic, the American official aid agency USAID in 2005 identified the underlying sources of state fragility as “governing arrangements that lack effectiveness and legitimacy”.<sup>8</sup>

Other researchers reach different conclusions, simply by using other variables, such as social disparities and the abuse of human rights. Research underpinning one of the indexes of state failure concluded:

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.<sup>9</sup>

Yet mainstream think-tanks usually play down politically charged hypotheses that fragility can arise from social injustice and exclusion. In 1999, the World Bank mounted a major research project, the “Economics of Civil Wars, Crime and Violence”. In widely cited findings, it concluded that social injustice (“grievance”) doesn’t explain civil wars; rather, the main culprits are bad people and their criminal behaviour (“greed”).<sup>10</sup>

### **A Convenient Tool**

Conventional accounts blame the usual suspects: despotic and greedy leaders. More subtle versions emphasise social divisions. Essentially, failing states have only themselves to blame for their misfortunes. Talk of failing states persists because a host of powerful and well-funded Western interests—geostrategists, military establishments, consulting firms, development agencies and humanitarian non-governmental organisations—finds it a useful banner behind which to rally.

## **Problems with ‘The Problem’**

Military chieftains, makers of foreign policy, and prominent media pundits generally accept accounts of the problem in the ways just sketched. But are those accounts valid and adequate? From a perspective of emancipatory global politics, there are reasons to think they are not.

### **A-political, A-historical Explanations**

Mainstream talk avoids essential matters of state purposes and politics. It takes for granted an ideal type or state that satisfies the needs of market systems and the norms of “responsibility”, as determined by dominant powers. The American political scientist Susan Woodward argues that the “consensus model” of the state is usually posed in the apolitical terms of development and security policy, not in terms of clashing interests and the need to negotiate among them.<sup>11</sup> Suspended beyond politics, the model is largely irrelevant to understanding the main issues—what makes states weak, and what would really be required for them to grow stronger.

Few states steered from the outside have become resilient in the sense of gaining capacities to respond to citizens’ needs and thus to enjoy popular legitimacy. In Africa, the colonial state emerged only after an “unnatural birth”, at a forced pace, usually at the point of a gun. Colonialism demolished pre-colonial systems of governance almost everywhere and set about constructing cheap and expedient apparatuses of domination. The basis of most countries was territorial, not socio-cultural; within these large spaces, state authority was thinly spread, and in some places entirely absent. Moreover, the core business of the colonial state was not nation-building, but the supervision of raw-material extraction and the mobilisation of tax revenues and labour-power on behalf of foreign elites. Legitimacy was merely assumed, never built or tested through public politics, which were forbidden up until almost the end. In short, neither colonisation nor de-colonisation left states able routinely to deliver public goods and responsive public politics.

A look at the rogues’ gallery of leading personages in troubled countries makes the “greedy-and-

corrupt-leader” explanation of state failure seem persuasive. Yet if this “big man” account of history were the only version to go by, one would never learn why Western powers keep kleptocratic dictators, sheikhs and warlords supplied with money, weapons and diplomatic protection. Moreover, when Western strategists change their minds and begin to vilify such leaders as menacing dictators,<sup>12</sup> publics are asked to see them as irrational losers in a “clash of civilisations”, or as merely deranged fanatics, or both. But whether the criteria are about moral integrity or psychological fitness, such narratives locate those deemed responsible for state failure beyond politics and outside history. With political *démarches* thus eliminated, the alternatives are reduced to locking up the brutes, or killing them.

Today, Western media publish fewer grand narratives of states brought down by primordial savagery and irrationality. But they continue to overlook some fundamental historical facts. For there is much evidence that inter-ethnic violence has often stemmed not from “age-old fury”, but from calculated political stratagems. In Sudan, the United States and Israel began supporting rebel armies in the 1960s; in Mozambique and Angola, the United States supported insurgencies backed by apartheid South Africa; in South Africa itself, a variety of Western interests promoted violent tribalist movements against Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress; in Rwanda, the French government supported a small political cabal that incited the 1994 pogroms; in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the thuggish kleptocrat Mobutu could not have gained power and reigned for thirty-two years without Western support. Interpretations of political disorder and violence look very different from mainstream narratives when the recruitment of elites is taken into account, together with their arms suppliers, hired gunmen, diplomatic protectors and offshore bankers.

### **Structural Adjustment**

Commonly overlooked in discussions of fragility are the measures pursued by powerful Western institutions to “roll back” government and delegitimise the public sector in favour of private actors. From the mid-1970s, a coalition of interests led by the World Bank and IMF (hitherto ardent backers of state-led growth) mounted concerted policy campaigns against *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 the capacity nor the legitimacy to steer economies.

Market-fundamentalist programmes of “structural adjustment” imposed by these aid-system coalitions meant downsizing the state, amputating services and subsidies for the poor, and selling off state assets. The costs to state capacity and legitimacy have been high, but for citizens the costs have been even higher. In the troubled Kyrgyz Republic, where neo-liberal “reform” has been exceptionally intense since the early 1990s, villagers told World Bank researchers:

Wellbeing 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 and youths. 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 every day. People are afraid of starvation, lack of heating, ethnic unrest. People bite one another like dogs.<sup>13</sup>

States have been further weakened by demands that they part with their money. Western governments, together with their financial-sector partners, have long insisted that low-income countries, before anything else, repay their foreign debt—although strategic possessions like Iraq and Afghanistan have been exempted from that requirement. Second, they must set aside large

amounts of national savings in offshore (dollar) reserves, in effect subsidising rich countries. Third, to comply with trade liberalisation policies, they had to shift tax burdens from external trade to internal consumption, by such means as value added taxes. These measures put poor countries at huge risk, as many state treasuries depended greatly on taxes and duties on external flows. Experience of the period 1975–2000 has shown that indeed the risks should not have been run, as most governments—especially the poorest and most fragile—failed to recover revenues lost from trade reform.<sup>14</sup>

Having followed the donors' policy formulas, impoverished governments have been forced to hand over even more sovereign powers to donors. Being more dependent, states find themselves at even greater risk, since many of the donors' big ideas—as the World Bank's own research has shown—are bad ideas. For example, after decades of pushing African countries to concentrate on farm exports, the World Bank now holds that a “development strategy based on agricultural commodity exports is likely to be impoverishing in the current agricultural policy environment”.<sup>15</sup> Detailed studies confirm the kinds of catastrophe 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”.<sup>16</sup> Outcomes elsewhere in Africa have been much the same. Indeed, researchers have concluded that in a typical African country, the strength of the economy is inversely proportional to the influence of the World Bank.<sup>17</sup>

This is not to conclude that structural adjustment measures ignited wide-scale conflict in every case. However, there is little doubt that occasionally they directly triggered violence, sometimes spectacularly, as in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and Guinea-Bissau in 1998. But in most cases, donor-imposed policy formulas worked less as a trigger and more as a facilitator.<sup>18</sup> Market fundamentalism generates cycles of booms and busts and exposes countries to forces that put brakes on economic growth. Outcomes include under-employment, rapid and non-transparent acquisition of assets by elites, and mounting inequality. Hence, the growth of “enabling environments” for breakdowns of pacts among elites and of peace between ethnic or regional groupings split by “horizontal inequalities”. Upheavals in 2005 and 2010 in the Kyrgyz Republic, and eruptions of “people power” across the Arab world in 2011, are merely more striking examples of the type of social unrest seen in many places under contemporary capitalism, but intensified by donor policy-formulas. As one observer remarks, “Egypt, Tunisia and Libya began to take their orders from IMF manuals in the late 1990s, and the current rebellions are as much anti-IMF riots as they are pro-democracy demonstrations.”<sup>19</sup>

### **States as Targets for Demolition**

Economic collapse, disorder and state breakdown have also been planned and executed in cold blood. For governments deemed unco-operative, the preferred option is “regime change”. In the 1980s, the United States gave the green light for full-scale rollback wars in southern Africa and Central America. In Afghanistan, the United States cultivated, bankrolled and equipped Islamic militants against a Soviet-supported regime—a successful insurgency that subsequently turned on its minders. The point of these interventions was to weaken and eventually to destroy governments. Programmes of economic reform were deployed to change regimes. 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 developmental but “strategic”, namely, the pursuit of the United States' destructive Cold War aims to their bitter end.<sup>20</sup> In short, state failure has sometimes been deliberate policy.

International politics since 1945 has of course seen some progressive developments: multilateral adherence to some universal rules, including respect for self-determination, sovereign autonomy and collective self-esteem. But today's talk about "failing states" puts those achievements in question. It recasts sovereign countries as Western frontier territories, "borderlands" that must be policed if risks of "spill over" or "contagion" are to be contained. For this reason, the British political scientist Mark Duffield sees the Western practice of designating a country as "failing" as tantamount to making it eligible for interventions, including recolonisation under international supervision.<sup>21</sup>

### **What Does the Global Setting Allow?**

Official accounts of failing states portray them as self-contained islands, whose true failure is to have missed the waves of globalisation.<sup>22</sup> Yet this view scarcely matches reality. For in much of Africa and elsewhere, states and economies have for generations been highly geared to outside systems; sovereign authorities respond today more than ever to interests operating at global levels. Binding international agreements required of states in exchange for official loans and access to global financial markets have locked sovereign powers over fiscal and monetary policy away from domestic influence, thus emptying political life of much real significance. Governments ratify their budgets only after approval in Washington, D.C. Today's typical African polity is, according to some scholars, "neither African nor state".<sup>23</sup>

Today, for governing elites and their private-sector allies, opportunities to acquire wealth and instruments of repression have never been greater, and the risks lower, than those offered by today's global setting. That environment includes:

- Wide access to under-regulated, private and secret banking services that facilitate the looting of public assets, tax evasion/avoidance, money-laundering and other forms of capital flight.
- Sovereignty as a commodity for sale to the highest bidder (think of tax havens, export-processing zones, the cut-rate licensing of ships, the dumping of dangerous waste, rights to offshore and underwater resources), 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 East Bloc lands).
- Corporate resistance to mandatory regulation of revenues gained from petroleum, diamonds, tropical hardwoods and other resources.

What are the outcomes? One is the emergence of *rentier* regimes where wealth and privilege are matters of luck and personal ties that allow cliques to create and capture rents. National authorities have few 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 advantages flowing from arrangements with foreign private and official agencies. Global incentive systems thus usually take precedence over domestic politics.

## **“The Problem’s” Inadequacies**

Corrupt despots, ethnic feuding and non-delivery of public services are certainly a reality. But in themselves they don’t explain why states weaken and break down. Among the chief flaws in mainstream definitions of “the problem”, the following stand out:

- Myopic, short-term concern about the security of the West and Western interests, to the neglect of building, over a longer term, solid bases for capable and legitimate governance.
- Unrealistic ambitions to see the rapid installation of state institutions along the lines of the legal–rational systems claimed for Western countries.
- A focus on territorial levels, within a country’s boundaries, as influenced in some cases by regional neighbours.
- A neglect of other Western-backed policy measures (such as conditionalities that lower revenues for poor states’ treasuries and encourage capital flight), in effect weakening state capacities, sovereignty and legitimacy.

## **‘Solutions’**

Faced with the consequences of state breakdown, Western policy elites no longer seek deliberately to shrink and delegitimise states and public politics. Today, they accept that states have to be capable of key tasks. They must be able not only to facilitate Western economic strategies, but also to police things that Western interests want to see controlled: flows of low-skill migrants and narcotics, and socio-political movements that threaten client governments. The issue today is no longer how to curb state power and dismantle public services, but rather how to curb social phenomena in ways that match Western strategies.

Led by the United States, Western countries are today developing “solutions” that combine old and new ways of exercising power, or of at least seeming to do so. They can be briefly summarised as follows.

### **Empire Old Style: Armed Intervention**

Dogged by its relative decline as the economic colossus of the world, the United States is currently reasserting hegemony by force or the threat of force, thereby strongly “securitising” Western approaches to state fragility. It defines both the problems and the solutions in military terms, while attributing humanitarian and developmental roles to the military. Depending on the circumstances, non-Western regimes may be defined across a spectrum from “rogue” to “fragile”, with the overall aim of making them eligible for armed intervention, whether overt or covert. The goal is 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 ... [W]e are in the business of bringing down hostile governments and creating governments favorable to us.<sup>24</sup>



A relevant question is how the United States intends to bring down governments it doesn't like. Today, despite bitter experiences of "blowback"—as seen in the outcome of US backing for Islamic insurgents in Afghanistan—covert intervention and low-intensity war are returning to the game after a spell on the benches following the 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. But, as shown by "Operation Enduring Freedom—Trans-Sahara", the Pentagon's third-largest anti-terror initiative after Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States is expanding its pursuit of militarised "solutions" to fragility across a range of sub-Saharan and North African nations.<sup>25</sup>

Since at least the 1930s, US military strategists have struggled to devise a coherent doctrine of "small wars" or "low-intensity conflict". 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 which are clearly dominated by the United States?<sup>26</sup>

Faced with these contradictions, some strategists and pundits call for solutions of an old-fashioned kind, including a revival of colonial rule or multilateral trusteeship over troubled countries. 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. Hence, today's preference for approaches that are less risky and expensive than direct rule. Indeed, a guiding principle is that most of the risk and expense are to be borne by the targeted states themselves.

Official state-building approaches are premised on containing, not resolving, problems. Many are a blend of beefed-up justice systems and policing, political re-engineering and "capacity building". US strategy statements emphasise stronger institutions for security and 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 must be factored into conflict management. US proposals say nothing whatever about "external drivers" such as global financial circuits. Some official analyses admit the importance of real political contestation as a part of "good governance". 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 in fact. Where policy instruments to steer an economy have been given up and where 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 who became "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."<sup>27</sup> Such acute, if cynical, reasoning manifests itself today with ever-increasing frequency. Western military purposes are being packaged in the language of humanitarianism. US-led sanctions and war against Iraq may have cost hundreds of thousands of lives, but humanitarian claims were made to justify the deaths. Humanitarian agencies are recruited into what are patently military-political adventures. Imperial and humanitarian impulses are being deliberately merged.

Agents for development, including non-governmental organisations, face rising pressures to become agents for security. At the same time, armed forces are taking on development tasks. 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”.<sup>28</sup> “Social work with guns” is now part of the military’s core business.<sup>29</sup> For counter-insurgency officers, the US Army handbook, the *Commander’s Guide to Money as a Weapons System*, published in April 2009, has become required reading. Yet winning wars on socio-political fronts is hardly a sure thing, especially when that job is given to soldiers. As one US defence expert put it, “people who are good killers tend not to be good mediators”.<sup>30</sup> Evidence from today’s Afghanistan, where the new doctrine is in full swing, shows that aid and counter-insurgency do not mix well. Indeed, in the context of a state where the political class is seen as illegitimate and corrupt, the approach backfires. It is based on little more than wishful thinking.<sup>31</sup>

### **The True Location of Power**

The past decade has witnessed “solutions” that generate new problems, reinforce old ones, and deflect attention from supra-national levels where deep and powerful drivers of state fragility continue to operate. It is to those upper levels, where politics have been denationalised and no one can be effectively held to account, that much power and authority have relocated. Especially in fragile, 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 the national and the global levels of power, where transnational “assemblages” increasingly overshadow the prerogatives of states, both “fragile” and “strong”.<sup>32</sup> 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 assemblages put in question the relevance of conventional notions of the nation-state as the chief locus of politics and thus of effective answers to fragility and its drivers.

### **A False Paradigm**

State failure is an idea that, although driven by questionable intentions, refers to objective realities. For the wretchedness seen in places where public order has decayed or imploded is manifestly real. Yet in the mainstream paradigm, the problem is only incidentally a failure to improve the security and wellbeing of citizens in non-Western countries; rather, the real problem is those countries’ failure to assure 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 supervision, preferably legitimised 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 for the majority—to underpin a “liberal peace”. That model of post-conflict development promotes the very things that weaken states and public order in the first place: foreign and domestic elite rent-seeking, inequality, exclusion, desperate scrambles for survival, 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. I have argued that it is seriously flawed in both those respects. Rather, its longevity will depend on its power to keep animating coalitions among powerful diplomatic, military, financial, academic and media blocs. Yet, even as it continues to justify those blocs’ ambitions and actions, and to mask their roles in creating disorder and malgovernance, the idea is unlikely to gain endorsement in the subaltern lands it purports to

describe.

Talk of state failure is likely to change in tone and intensity as Western geostrategists come to terms with other realities. One reality is the West's loss of primacy in Africa and elsewhere to interests from China and other thrusting competitors such as Brazil and India. Another is the rising spending-power of some hitherto "fragile" mineral-exporting states, such as Angola and Zambia, Ecuador and Equatorial Guinea. Terms of the discussion may change as pessimistic forecasts are proven wrong. In 2003, the United Nations was urged to revive its Trusteeship Council in order to take over the management of Liberia; yet today that country's recovery from war has failed to demonstrate any need for recolonisation. Finally, upheavals in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab world have thrown off-balance if not overboard those parts of the "failed-state" paradigm that diagnose popular insurrections as pathological things to be repressed, rather than logical things to be welcomed.

Such shifts can give further momentum to calls for a rethink. 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 supra-national systems of the incentives available to leaderships which are furnished by the West's own laws and practices—incentives such as opportunities for private gain through collaboration in illicit trade and for sequestering those gains in offshore banks and tax havens. Such perspectives would allow Western pundits and policymakers to see the truth of the prestigious Royal African Society's 2005 report, "A Message to World Leaders", published during a crescendo of plans and promises to spend more on Africa. The heart of that message was: "It's not just about thinking up good things we should do to Africa—it's about the bad things we should stop doing."<sup>33</sup>

#### Endnotes

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11. Susan L. Woodward, “Fragile States: Exploring the Concept” (paper presented at the FRIDE international seminar, “Failing States or Failed States? The Role of Development Models”, Madrid, 2005), p. 5.
12. Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi is but the latest in a long line of dictators—think of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Panama’s Manuel Noriega—to suffer this image reversal. By the same logic of *Realpolitik*, dictators like Somalia’s Siad Barre underwent makeovers as model statesmen after having been vilified as Marxist autocrats.
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