

# Does International Order Ultimately Rely on States and Military Power?

Written by Haoyu Zhai

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HAOYU ZHAI, APR 22 2015

### Introduction

In International Relations (IR), the concept of 'international order' generally denotes 'an order between states in a system or society of states' (Jackson and Sørensen, 2010: 302). Within the discipline, the inter-paradigm debate on the role of states and military power in the shaping and reshaping of such order in world politics continues to captivate specialists from different perspectives (Brown and Ainley, 2005: 3-5; Dunne and Schmidt, 2014: 110-111; Hurrell, 2007: 8-9; Jackson and Sørensen, 2010: 18-19; Sutch and Elias, 2007: 83-84). Employing as empirical evidence the increasing presence and importance of non-state actors and non-military capabilities in global political affairs and activities, certain scholars have denounced states and military power as fundamental determinants of international order (Cerny, 2010: 28-32; Strange, 1996: 12-15). In disagreement with such assertion, this essay argues that despite the growing significance of other actors and factors, in the contemporary global context international order still ultimately relies on states and military power. The following sections will be dedicated to the validation of this proposition, with the first and second sections demonstrating respectively the determining nature of the state and military power vis-à-vis the present international order.

### International Order, States and Military Power

#### *States and International Order*

Among the multitude of actors in the contemporary international system, notwithstanding the continual proliferation and augmentation of non-state players, international order remains ultimately reliant upon states. On the one hand, modern states *per se* are pivotal and fundamental to the preservation, evolution and transformation of the present political, economic and legal orders and norms that *en masse* constitute the existent international order. Contrary to hyper-globalist prophecies of the eventual extinction of nation-states under unprecedented globalization (Sutch and Elias, 2007: 144-145; Weiss, 1998: 1-3), empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated the centrality of states in all three aforementioned dimensions of international order. The practical nature of state capacity to the construction and deconstruction of global systematic and structural arrangements has kept states as *sui generis* agents that ultimately determine international order.

For instance, the hegemonic capacity of the United States to maintain the existing unipolar world system, as well as rising powers' growing challenge to American global dominance have clearly reflected the fundamental importance of state power to international political order (Kegley and Blanton, 2013: 106-114; Schweller and Pu, 2011: 42). Similarly, the international exercise of military leadership by prominent countries such as the US and its coalitional allies in large-scale wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has also manifested the decisive role of individual states in global political ordering (Killingsworth, 2010: 132-134; Stavrianakis and Selby, 2013: 17). In addition, the ability of emerging market countries like Brazil and India to effectively stymie the 2001 Doha global trade negotiations plainly revealed the practical dependency of the international economic order on state decisions and actions (Fontaine and Kliman, 2013: 99-100; Mansbach, 2010: 120-121). Finally, the immense impact on international law created by Russia's partisan legitimization and justification of its recent annexation of Crimea, particularly on legal conception and

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interpretation of the responsibility for military intervention and right of self-determination, has displayed the important role of states in shaping international legal order (Burke-White, 2014). Therefore, as discerned in these cases, states are instrumental to the change and continuity of multi-dimensional structural norms and orders in the international system, which confirms its role as the ultimate agential determinant of international order.

On the other hand, contemporary non-state actors have not realized or replaced the faculty and functionality of states in the underpinning or undermining of international order, in spite of their remarkable qualitative and quantitative developments. With few exceptions most such players, intergovernmental, transnational or supranational alike, still suffer from inferiority in capacity and legitimacy relative to sovereign states and their dependency upon the latter. While complex interdependence theorists were primarily correct in emphasizing the interwoven and intertwined interconnections and interactions between state and non-state actors in the international arena, empirical experience of world politics has often painted an actual picture more similar to that described by neo-realists and neoclassical realists (Brown and Ainley, 2005: 35-45; Donnelly, 2005: 34-40; Dunne and Schmidt, 2014: 104-106). For what practical circumstances frequently reveal is the sustained preponderance of state behaviour in determining structural norms and rules governing not only the holistic, predominantly anarchic international system *in toto*, but also many non-state actors on regional and global levels. As the selected examples below substantiate, the agential capacity of nation-states has not been eroded by the expansion and amplification of their non-state counterparts; the conservation and modification of international order still rely principally on states amidst the multiplicity of players and competitors.

For example, the authority and efficacy of the United Nations in global governance and management has repeatedly been beset by member states' failure to construct consensual agreements or abide by its decisions, as seen in successive events from its inability to obstruct the invasion of Iraq by certain Western powers in 2003, to its incapability of expanding the Security Council membership under American resistance in 2005, to its incapacity to grant India its pursued permanent Security Council seat in 2008 due to Chinese opposition, and to its inadequacy to produce an effective resolution on Syria in 2012 (Brown and Ainley, 2005: 137; Kegley and Blanton, 2013: 155; Taylor and Curtis: 315). Likewise, despite unprecedented structural construction of supranational institutions and regulations, presently the efficacious operation of the European Union remains dependent on the coordination and cooperation of its individual member states, as observed in multiple aspects such as the pivotal role of Eurozone countries in post-2008 financial crisis management or the continued privilege of member states to nominate preferred candidates into the European Commission (Best and Christiansen, 2014: 413; Kegley and Blanton, 2013: 166). Moreover, as Weiss (1998: 185) pointed out, with regard to multinational corporations, 'the importance of a home base remains inescapable' and 'the number of genuinely transnational companies is rather small', which exposed their economic dependence on states rather than vice versa. Hence, as demonstrated by these instances, non-state actors still lack the capacity or autonomy to assume the traditional function of states as agential cornerstones of international order. Thus, although non-state actors are growing in scale and significance, contemporary international order remains ultimately reliant on states in lieu of other agents.

## ***Military Power and International Order***

In spite of the increasing importance of other forms of capabilities, in the contemporary global context international order still depends fundamentally on military power. Even though economic and socio-cultural capacities appear increasingly influential in present-day world politics, military power remains the most decisive attribute which ultimately dictates and determines outcomes of global political processes and orders of international relations. Firstly, the unrivaled ability and potentiality of military power to achieve deterrence and destruction make it irreplaceably essential for the survival and success of states and the institutional and organisational structures they constitute, a key reason for the importance of military power to international order. Intellectual acknowledgement of such military dependency of world order is not limited to classical realist scholarship (Jackson and Sørensen, 2010: 60-66). Indeed, apart from paradigmatic disagreements on inter-state coherence and cooperation, neo-realist, neo-liberal and the English School theorists have generally recognized the practical importance of military capability for states in the basically anarchic international system or society (Brown and Ainley, 2005: 45-52; Linklater, 2005: 85-92). Such inter-paradigm acceptance of military power's utmost gravity has persistently been corroborated by empirical occurrences, as shown below.

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To illustrate, the large-scale armies maintained by Asian countries, the continued possession of nuclear weapons by leading powers, the American response to 9/11 terrorist attack in the form of the global 'War on Terror', and the Western armed interventions in Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Libya have all displayed the fundamental importance of military power to global political outcomes and international order (Brown and Ainley, 2005: 241-242; Dalby, 2013: 35-37; Shaw, 2013: 27). In similar manners, the British deployment of navy warship to Gibraltar in face of Anglo-Spanish dispute, the Chinese deployment of military aircraft over the Senkakus amidst Sino-Japanese confrontation, as well as the Eritrean-Ethiopian and Indo-Pakistani wars on territorial conflicts have each revealed the great extent to which modern international relations and outcomes are determined by states' military capabilities (BBC, 2013; Hook, 2014: 10; Kegley and Blanton, 2013: 214). Moreover, the prevalence of a global post-Cold War militarist culture, the extension of operational responsibilities of national militaries, the continual prosperity of the arms trade industry and the substantial politico-economic investments by states into weaponry development and innovation all indicate that the contemporary global context remains much more Clausewitzian than Kantian (Killingsworth, 2010: 129-134; Stavrianakis and Selby, 2013: 16-18), where international order relies heavily and essentially on military power instead of other factors.

Secondly, apart from the distinctive capacity of military power in itself, the ineptitude of alternative forms of power to amply conserve or convert international order also causes the latter to rely ultimately on military capabilities. Admittedly, akin to the case of non-state actors examined above, such non-military power has enjoyed appreciable growth in competency and utility; nevertheless just as states maintain their agential predominance, military power retains its practical ascendancy among diverse attributes in determining international order. That non-martial capabilities prove inapt to secure stability and security in contemporary world politics is evident in the present international society:

Liberal optimism has led to an exaggerated sense of ease that forgets its own precariousness, for example regarding the potential political impact of severe economic dislocation; the crises of identity provoked by globalization and interdependence; and the coexistence of inter-state peace with domestic violence or civil war. Indeed the often close juxtaposition of high levels of economic prosperity and successful democratic consolidation with civil war, terrorist violence, marginality, and human rights abuses strains the view that the post-Cold War world could be neatly divided into zones of peace and conflict (Hurrell, 2007: 174).

In other words, the inherently contradictory function of economic, socio-cultural and other forms of power renders such forces incapable of delivering and defending order and stability in the international arena. This is further observed in South Africa's diplomatic failure to stop Nigeria from executing civil dissidents by using Nelson Mandela's social influence, in the Euro-American diplomatic failure to stop Russia from completing the annexation of Crimea by imposing economic sanctions, and in the European Union's diplomatic failure to expand its geopolitical leverage in Asia by using exclusively non-military, socio-economic power (Brown and Ainley, 2005: 87; Burke-White, 2014: 74; Chan, 2010: 143-144). Furthermore, commenting on the inability of the so-called 'soft', non-martial forces and capabilities to uphold the current international order, the former US Secretary of State Robert Gates forthrightly argued that:

[t]he ultimate guarantee against the success of aggressors, dictators, and terrorists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as in the 20<sup>th</sup>, is 'hard' power – the size, strength, and global reach of the United States military (quoted in Kegley and Blanton, 2013: 234).

Therefore, as empirical evidence substantiates, in the present global context non-military forms of power prove incapable of fundamentally determine inter-state orders and relations, which ergo reaffirms that international order depends essentially upon military power rather than other factors. International order in contemporary world politics still relies ultimately on states and military power.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued and demonstrated that despite the growing significance of other actors and factors, in the contemporary global context international order still ultimately relies on states and military power. As shown in the two

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main sections of this essay, notwithstanding the increasing importance of non-state actors and non-military power, the unique and unparalleled capacities of states and military force, combined with the inadequacy and inefficacy of alternative forms of agents and capabilities, have determined that present-day international order would depend fundamentally on states and military power. Such persistent dominance of nation-states and material strength in contemporary global politics also reflects the historical continuity in international relations and world politics, an empirical phenomenon demanding increasing and improving academic attention and appreciation from International Relations specialists.

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*Written by: Haoyu Zhai*  
*Written at: University of Bristol*  
*Written for: Dr. Eric Herring*  
*Date written: January 2015*