

# State Failure and the Agency vs. Structure Debate

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TERESA LAPPE-OSTHEGE, APR 17 2013

### On the Causes of State Failure – Placing North Korea and Somalia in the Agency vs. Structure Debate

#### Introduction

The collapse of state constructs and their resurrection within new borders – geographically, politically and culturally – is nothing new – although it has arguably gained newfound importance after 9/11 (Herbst, 2004, p. 303). Included in several national security strategies (National Security Strategy, 2002; 2006), state failure has become a top international security concern and therefore a priority for policy-makers (Spear & Williams, 2012, p. 7). Nevertheless, state failure is more than a security issue and its inherent complexity hampers the creation of streamlined policies: it links security threats to development issues by, for example, connecting transnational terrorism and extreme poverty (National Security Strategy, 2002; Dorff, 2005, p. 21). In times when increasing attention is paid to human security, this dual focus makes it not only harder to identify the real threat, but also to pinpoint the causes thereof.

The categorisation of states into, for instance, 'weak' and 'failed', as seen in the Failed States Index (FSI), is used to simplify this issue (Fund For Peace, 2012a). However, this practice and its underlying understanding of state failure has been criticised for being inherently Western-centric and too general. For instance, while the FSI groups both Somalia and North Korea together as failed states, the causes and implications of their failure are very distinct, calling for different policies (Tansey, 2012). Assuming the causes of state failure are deeply intertwined with the causes of contemporary security and development challenges, it can be argued that they should be a core consideration in the policy-making process. However, there is disagreement on what constitutes the causes of state failure: irresponsible and predatory leadership or structural underpinnings (Williams, 2009).

This paper addresses whether the concept of state failure is helpful for understanding today's security and development challenges, arguing that the concept is too simplistic, universalistic and static. The paper first places the concept of state failure in the current debate on agency and structure. Second, it contextualises the cases of North Korea and Somalia in the framework of these two approaches and, third, evaluates the findings. As above, the analysis takes the concept of state failure as the outcome variable, focusing on its causes. This is not to neglect the consequences of state failure, but a clear methodological approach is necessary to avoid circular arguments.

#### 1. Conceptual Debate

Before proceeding to a closer examination of the agency and structural approaches to the causes of state failure, some clarification is necessary. As the issue of state failure allows for various starting points of analysis, three key aspects of the present research need to be singled out to provide for a common basis of analysis.

Firstly, the notion of the state needs to be defined, and here four key characteristics of what Jackson and Rosberg call 'juridical statehood' become apparent: (1) a constant population residing in (2) a defined territory, over which (3) an effective government rules and is recognized as (4) independent by the international society (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982, p. 3; Kreijgen, 2004, p. 18). The principle of sovereignty plays an integral role within the international society (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982, p. 13). As below, these elements are the lowest common denominators of the different approaches to state failure.

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Secondly, the components of the contemporary security environment need to be identified so as to frame the concept of state failure. The contemporary security environment is defined as a multipolar system of interdependent actors organised as a security community along liberal-democratic lines (Buzan, 1991, pp. 434-436; Gheciu, 2008, p. 1; Clark, 2011). Following 9/11, the security discourse shifted from an emphasis on the survival of the state to human security (Buzan, 1991, p. 433).

Thirdly, from these underlying dynamics emerge new challenges to international security and development. Since 1945, the number of intra-state as opposed to inter-state conflicts has risen (Schneckener, 2011, p. 576; Newman, 2004, pp. 174-175). These conflicts, in which non-state actors gain importance and blur the distinction between public and private entities, are of an transnational nature and can spill-over into neighbouring regions (Ibid.). Terrorism, organised crime, and trafficking can result from such violence and has been found to have direct repercussions on socio-economic development (Williams, 2009, p. 3; World Bank, 2011, p. 5).

It seems crucial to understand the pressures of the contemporary security environment and the subsequent challenges exerted onto the perception of the state in order to comprehend the dynamics of the present debate. Having created the wider framework, the next section introduces the core assumptions of the agency and structural approaches to state failure.

## *1.1 The Agency Approach to Causes of State Failure*

Arguing for the causes of state failure to be found in predatory agency, this approach views the state in its Westphalian meaning, and does not question the importance of sovereignty (Rotberg, 2002; 2004; Carment, 2003). It perceives a failed state as an entity that finds itself incapable of providing public services, including security, within its territory, lacks internal legitimacy and is shaken by continuous violence (Rotberg, 2002, pp. 85-86; 2004, p. 4; Carment, 2003, p. 409; Dorff, 2005, p. 23). The state's institutions are incapable of preventing the emergence of an informal conflict economy that can create self-sustaining dynamics and fuel the conflict in question, creating an environment favourable to internationalised security threats (Rotberg, 2004, p. 10).

While advocates of this approach acknowledge the importance of structural factors, they argue that the influence of leadership and the interactions on what Carment calls the 'micro-level' prevail (2003, pp. 415-417). These interactions rest on a struggle for power and control, with violence supported through proliferation and organised crime used as a legitimised tool to achieve set aims (Ibid.; Williams, 2009, p. 3). Whether these actions are motivated by aspirations of material profit or by underlying grievances against another group forms a different debate that cannot be addressed here. However, economic opportunities for individuals may also drive conflict (Carment, 2003, p. 416; Rotberg, 2002, p. 93). Rotberg argues that

'state failure is man-made, not merely accidental nor ... caused geographically, environmentally, or externally. Leadership decisions and leadership failures have destroyed states and continue to threaten the fragile polities ....' (Rotberg, 2002, p. 93).

For him, the solution lies in preventing state failure by strengthening the current state structures (pp. 94-96). According to Dorff, this would also involve the promotion of democracy to counteract the profitable dynamics emerging from 'legitimate government deficit[s]' (2005, p. 24). From these arguments emerges an image of the causes of state failure that does not question the structural underpinnings of the state and its sovereignty. The understanding of contemporary security and development challenges is therefore constrained by this emphasis on agency.

## *1.2. The Structural Approach to Causes of State Failure*

Supporters of the structural approach perceive Westphalian statehood as too Western-centric to be used as a common basis to explain state failure. Rather, they see this specific understanding of the state as the crux of the issue in itself. Taking Africa as an example, they argue that the Westphalian state has been unable to emerge in African states, as they experience political dynamics that are not compatible with the Western understanding of

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statehood (Williams, 2009, p. 3). Such dynamics are informal and decentralised, rooted in a patrimonial system of patrons and clients (Chabal & Daloz, 1998, p. 1; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, p. 253). For Herbst, this system finds its origins in colonisation when former city- or nation-states were rearranged along arbitrary borders (1996, p. 120). This structure was accepted as a given post-colonisation, despite the fact that not land but people had been the object of control in African politics (pp. 127-128). Therefore, the causes of state failure do not only lie in predatory agency, but in an erroneous understanding of statehood and sovereignty. As Chabal and Daloz write, the 'state is no more than ... a pseudo-Western façade masking the realities of deeply personalized political relations' (1998, p. 16).

Drawing on this understanding of statehood, a differentiated approach to the causes of failure can be identified, which arguably allows for more streamlined responses to contemporary security and development issues. While some scholars argue that identifying the specific area in which a state fails would support streamlined and ultimately successful responses, others, including Herbst or Chabal and Daloz, go further (Call, 2010). They believe structures other than the nation-state need to be found to give expression to local power politics, and acknowledge that this entails a challenge to the international understanding of state sovereignty (Herbst, 1996, 2004; Chabal & Daloz, 1998). Loosening the sovereignty principle, as Herbst argues, can open up numerous alternatives, from sub-state divisions to decertification of sovereignty and the emergence of new nation-states (1996, pp. 312-316).

Considering these two distinct approaches to explaining the causes of state failure – and therefore the root causes of contemporary security and development challenges – their practical applicability needs to be tested so as to determine their wider significance. Thus, the next section examines the cases of North Korea and Somalia with the aim of identifying the causes of state failure in each country.

## 2. Case Studies

### 2.1 North Korea

Within the framework of the FSI, the Fund For Peace ranks North Korea 22<sup>nd</sup> out of a total of 177 countries (Fund For Peace, 2011). North Korea is said to perform poorly in all three areas of analysis: social and economic (e.g. poverty), political and military (e.g. state legitimacy and public services), and state institutions and civil society (e.g. judiciary). Since a collection of quantitative findings does not give any relevant insights into the causes of state failure, the context of the conflict needs to be considered.

From its establishment in 1948, North Korea was backed by the Soviet Union, which also supported its attempts to invade South Korea and spread communism in 1950 (Freedom House, 2012a). When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990, North Korea's economy collapsed and, coupled with a devastating famine in the early 1990s, exerted great pressure on the population (Eberstadt, 2012; Haggard & Noland, 2009, p. 2-3). During that time, the state experienced an uncontrollable degree of marketisation as the population sought ways outside of state structures to access food and other goods (Haggard & Noland, 2009, p. 2-3). Harsh government policies, including currency reforms, were introduced to secure control, but had extremely negative impacts on the economy, which was hyper-militarised and far from self-sufficient (Eberstadt, 2012). These rigorous internal policies were met externally with aggressive security performances, including nuclear armament and provoking diplomacy, bringing insecurity to its wider region (Ibid.).

Whereas Eberstadt identifies the causes for this in the economic factors inherent in the Korean system of socialism, and triggered by decisions taken by Kim Jong Il decades ago, Freedom House gives a more differentiated analysis (Ibid.). While it ranks North Korea as 'Not Free' on all three levels of analysis (freedom, civil liberties, political rights), it emphasises the non-democratic political system and its inherent vulnerability to corruption. This entails not only a lack of personal freedoms but, most importantly, a lack of the rule of law. However, it does not provide for a founded identification of root-causes (Freedom House, 2012a). Though the various scholarships disagree on the categorisations assigned to the North Korean case, they seem to agree on the fact that the state's poor performance in every important area of traditional statehood appears to be rooted in its extractive economy.

### 2.2 Somalia

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The FSI ranks Somalia first out of a total of 177 countries (Fund For Peace, 2012b). Like North Korea, Somalia performs poorly in all three areas of analysis, i.e. social and economic, political and military, and state institutions and civil society. Its alarmingly poor scores on the latter are particularly striking (Ibid.).

Again, these scores need to be seen in context. After gaining independence in 1960, the Republic of Somalia only lived for nine years before it was overthrown and a military dictatorship was established under Mohamed Siad Barre (Leeson, 2007, pp. 4-5). With Soviet backing in 1970, Barre imposed a socialist system on the country, nationalising the land (Ibid.). Since the economy contracted under these circumstances, socialism was formally abandoned to secure foreign aid, though the economy was still largely controlled by the state (Ibid, pp. 7-8). The dictatorship is said to have fostered ethnic tensions still evident today. While the nature of warfare that Somalia experiences changed from inter- to intra-clan conflict after the collapse of Barre's rule in 1991, these unresolved tensions have arguably led to a state of lawlessness, in which no central authority rules over the whole territory of the country (Ibid, p. 5; Menkhaus, 2003, pp. 407-410). The Transitional Federal Government, though internationally recognised, does not enjoy domestic support (Leeson, 2007, p. 29). Informal non-state actors, such as clans or businessmen, have resumed state activities and partly provide public services and security (Menkhaus, 2003, p. 412).

Against this background, Freedom House distinguishes between Somalia and Somaliland, which claimed independence in 1991, but has not been internationally recognised (Freedom House, 2012b). Whereas Somalia is categorised as 'Not Free' due to an instability nourished by continuing clashes between clans and other insurgent groups, such as Al-Shabaab, Somaliland is ranked as 'Partly Free' having established a democratic government that includes traditional power dynamics: clan elders are represented in the so-called upper house (Ibid.; Freedom House, 2012c).

While some scholars argue that the instability of the Somali case is mainly due to a weak government and a lack of law and order, fed by deeply-rooted distrust in state structures, others believe that the underlying clan tensions would disrupt any attempt of state-building if not reconciled (Ibid.; Leeson, 2007, p. 6; Menkaus, 2003, p. 407). To what extent these cases contextualise the question of whether the concept of state failure is helpful for understanding contemporary security and development challenges is investigated in the following section of the paper, placing them in the agency-structure debate outlined above.

## 3. Evaluation

Recalling this paper's core assumption that drawing any conclusions about contemporary security and development challenges from the concept of state failure requires its causes to be identified, the above examples highlight the issue's inherent complexity. A few core observations need to be highlighted. First, the simple numerical findings and rankings as provided by the FSI or Freedom House only scratch the surface. While they may provide an insight into the characteristics of the respective cases, they fail to show concern for deeper underlying causes (Tansey, 2012). Second, accounting for the characteristics of juridical statehood as outlined above, North Korea classifies as a state, since its government rules over a constant population in a given territory by international recognition (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982, p. 3). Somalia, however, does not meet these criteria with the exception of internationally recognised independence. This observation inevitably leads to a wider concern for the concept of sovereignty. While it does not seem to be at risk in the North Korean case, it is in Somalia. It has been argued that the contemporary African state does not consider underlying socio-political dynamics and is therefore constantly prone to conflict (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982, p. 13). This has direct repercussions on present security and development concerns. Existing ungoverned spaces have allowed Somalia to become a safe haven for terrorists, protected from outside intervention under the umbrella of state sovereignty (Williams, 2009, p. 7). What can be observed is the emergence of a vicious circle: the sacredness of sovereignty adds a self-fulfilling dynamic to the disruptive forces of conflict causing and reinforcing state failure (Kreijgen, 2004, p.2). States that are not legitimised internally only exist in their legal understanding or as 'quasi-states' (Kreijgen, 2004, p. 3; Williams, 2011, p. 7). Thus, the sovereign state itself seems to be part of the problem in the Somali case. The degree of (alternative) functioning state capacities in Somaliland would prove this point.

Third, both countries fail to provide services to their citizens, lack internal legitimacy, experience an uncontrollable

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conflict economy, and have to face organised crime and violence. For North Korea, these issues may be traced back to its predatory dictatorship, in which corruption, state terror and an uncontrolled conflict economy undermined the imposed order of the strong state (Freedom House, 2012a). For Somalia, a lack of internally recognised state structures and the emerging lawlessness deepened by ethnic tensions and clan politics may be attributed to a different understanding of the state as such. Chabal and Daloz argue that a fundamentally distinct approach to modernisation underlies this 'political instrumentalization of disorder' that has little to do with the Western perception of state and sovereignty (1998, p. 143).

In conclusion, quantitative assessments do not shed sufficient light on the underlying causes of state failure. Despite fundamental differences, the agency and structural approaches go much deeper. However, they cannot be universalised. Acknowledging that North Korea and Somalia fail to fulfil their state duties in different areas, North Korea's failure can be attributed to predatory leadership decisions, while Somalia's break down seems to be rooted in its structural underpinnings.

## Conclusion

Drawing on the above, it can be seen that state failure in itself is a highly contested concept. It can be helpful in superficially assessing contemporary security and development challenges, such as transnational terrorism and poverty, but it cannot provide deep insights into their causes. The concept of state failure suffers from inherent oversimplification and is vulnerable to circular arguments that can be misleading in the creation of policies targeting the above-mentioned challenges. Due to limitations, the present paper could only touch upon some core assumptions of the debate. Further differentiated research is necessary to investigate the role of colonisation, the challenges and alternatives to sovereignty, such as humanitarian intervention, UN Trusteeship and shared sovereignty, and their impact on global governance (Krasner, 2004; Kreijgen, 2004; Schneckener, 2011).

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