

The Implications of State Failure on Security

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/07/19/critically-evaluate-state-failure-and-its-implications-for-security/>

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Citing Relevant Examples to Illustrate, Critically Evaluate the Notion of 'State Failure' and the Implications of 'State Failure' for Security.

The concept of 'state failure' emerged in the early 1990s (Helman & Ratner 1993), as predominantly Western policymakers attempted to apply a theoretical framework to the series of often-catastrophic violent upheavals and humanitarian issues occurring within developing (or underdeveloped) states across the world. Referred to as a "new paradigmatic menace" (Sogge 2011, pg. 1), the concept has been criticised for framing the realities of the mass internal insecurity within these states in accordance with the foreign policy priorities of the established, formerly colonial, powers (Grimm, Lemay-Hébert & Nay 2014). So whilst the localised, regional and international security implications caused by 'state failure' are evident, the "frustratingly imprecise" concept is, however, subject to politicised interpretation (Chomsky 2006, pg 1). Responses to 'state failure' and its associated security implications are therefore influenced significantly by the shifting global political context within which 'failed states' function.

The purpose of this essay is to critically evaluate the notion of 'state failure' and the security implications 'failed states' have on security. Here, I will argue that there is incongruence between the notion of state failure in an analytical sense, and the empirical application, which is highly politicized – that is, the concept is subjectively interpreted, and fails to adequately define what the referent object is to be secured. The security implications are such that it leads to inconsistent application of the term, and therefore varying responses to deal with the myriad of localised, regional and international security threats arising from 'state failure'. My supporting arguments include: outlining the evolution of contemporary statehood to show how this process has created a sovereignty paradox perpetuating fragility and insecurity amongst these weak states; outlining how the convergence between the shifting political context and the broadening and deepening notions of security has led to the subjective, interpretation of 'failed states' for a political purpose; highlighting the security implications of 'state failure' will be discussed through the lens of human security, regime security and state security.

The Evolution of Statehood and the Sovereignty Paradox

Critical analyses of 'state failure' concepts require an outline of the international system within which these states have developed, for when it is known "why states exist, in whose interest they should function, and thus for whom they fail or succeed", the notion of 'state failure' become meaningful (Sogge 2011, pg. 2). The contemporary international system is organised according to traditional Westphalian principles, which dictate the constitutive norms of statehood – "political authority based on territory, mutual recognition, autonomy and control" (Krasner 2001, pg. 14). Post-World War II, these principles were codified into international law with the development of the United Nations (UN) system, whereby the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention were enshrined in Article 2 of the UN Charter (United Nations 2014a). This validated and recognized the independent state as the core political units of global governance. Cooperation amongst these nation-states was then institutionalised within this UN system, with international security largely seen as the responsibility of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

The post-colonial period saw a proliferation of states joining the international system, each being recognised as juridically sovereign polities (Mayall 2005). Yet the capacity of all states to maintain genuine sovereign independence is significantly compromised by the various aspects of the system within which they are developing. Emerging within

The Implications of State Failure on Security

Written by Rachael Aldridge

the second half of the 20th Century was therefore a paradox of international relations, whereby there was essentially a hollowing out of the term as its meaning was quantified on a state-by-state basis. This paradox emerges within the various analyses of what constitutes state strength, and what attributes states must possess in order to remain stable within this system.

From a legal perspective, strong states are recognised as such if they have absolute sovereign power over a territory and the population within, have functioning governance structures that provide public goods, and monopolise legitimate challenges to authority (Chan 2013). Jackson (2013, pg. 164) argues that the dimensions of state strength rest upon: “infrastructural capacity”, the state’s institutional capacity to perform key tasks and deliver services; “coercive capacity”, referring to the state’s will to use force to offset potential governance challenges; and, “national identity and social cohesion”, a social contract whereby the population identify with the nation-state and accept the legitimacy of the state. Goldstone (2008) suggests state stability requires two overarching qualities: effectiveness, which reflects the state’s capability to carry out these aforementioned functions; and legitimacy, reflecting the extent to which the actions of the state are perceived to be “just” or “reasonable” within this Westphalian framework. Whilst these demonstrable attributes of statehood may be internationally recognized, the traditional principles are frequently violated under the aegis of other norms, including humanitarian intervention, democracy promotion, economic security, and international security (Krasner 2001).

Established states enjoy positive sovereignty, whereby governments have effective and legitimate control over their territory and their population, have the capability to monopolise security threats, and thereby protect their interests. Weak states experience negative sovereignty, as they lack the capability to militarily defend themselves against more powerful states, lack internal sovereignty and possess weak domestic governance structures (Clapham 1998). This dichotomy has produced a hierarchical structure within the international system whereby sovereignty becomes qualified in congruence with increased fragility (Jackson 1990, pg. 9; Ghani & Lockhart 2008, pg. 21). The paradox that has developed is that as increasingly greater numbers of sovereign states were or are created and recognized by the international community, it is occurring within an international system that essentially disempowers them.

The political posturing of states during the Cold War is integral to how this paradox manifests itself in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Best explained through the lens of structural realism, the bipolarity of the international system during the latter half of the 20th Century produced an ongoing geopolitical balancing process, whereby these newly sovereign states aligned themselves with either one of the global powers, the Soviet Union or the U.S (Snow 1996). Throughout this period, the typology of state strength became secondary to the pursuit of structural stability, maintained through the shoring up of political allegiances. To achieve this, each of the global powers would prop up states that were functionally weak, a process known as regime security – the condition where the security of the governing elites is secured from (predominantly internal) violent challenges to authority (Jackson 2013). As the Cold War ended in 1991, the balancing process came to an end, as did the support for ‘fragile’ state regimes.

Determining ‘State Failure’: A Politicised Process

The post-Cold War period was an important time for broadening and deepening notions of security. In line with early 1990s emergence of ‘state failure’ in international political discourse (Helman & Ratner 1993), the first major statement regarding ‘human security’ appeared in the United Nations Development Program’s 1994 Human Development Report (United Nations Development Program 2014). Advocating for a more constructivist approach to the traditionally narrow interpretations of security, whereby securing the needs and right of the world’s citizens becomes central to security policies (Paris 2001), these ideas were taken seriously by key (predominantly Western) policymakers.

During this time, the security policies of the global powers are best explained by the process of securitisation – “the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects” (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, pg. 25). Referent objects, things subject to an existential threat and that have “a legitimate claim to survival”, are deemed to be securitised only on the basis of legitimate acceptance by a given population (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, pg. 36). It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the theoretical robustness of securitisation; it does, however, provide an appropriate framework through which to view how ‘state

The Implications of State Failure on Security

Written by Rachael Aldridge

failure' is assessed, interpreted, and responded to, in the contemporary international system. By applying this framework to the notion of 'state failure', we observe the securitisation of underdevelopment, whereby the concern of the international community for the emancipation of individuals and groups within these fragile states is in line with constructivist approach.

From an analytical perspective, weak/fragile/failing states should, by definition, lack many or all of the characteristics of state strength. There exists, however, great definitional debate as to exactly what constitutes 'state failure'. Zartman (2011, pg. 2503) posits that 'state failure', or 'state collapse' occurs when the "basic functions of the state are no longer performed". This broad definition encapsulates the difficulty in operationalising the term for application to specific security (or insecurity) situations. Alternatively, Rotberg (2003, pg. 1) theorises that "nation-states fail because they are convulsed by internal violence and can no longer deliver positive public goods to their inhabitants". Part of the definitional difficulty in reaching a consensus regarding what constitutes 'state failure' is that as process, its fundamental criteria are unstable in nature (Chan 2013).

This is reflected in the variance amongst indices used to measure 'state failure' or 'fragility'. These include: the Failed States Index (The Fund for Peace 2014), which ranks states based on twelve indicators of vulnerability from 'very sustainable' through to 'high alert'; the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (World Bank 2014), used by the World Bank to calculate international aid allocations; and the Index of State Weakness in the Developing World (Brookings Institution 2014). These indices seek to measure state performance upon various dimensions of state strength, relative to other states within the system. Key criticisms of these indexes, however, is the lack of consensus between measures, the subjectivity with which arbitrary decisions regarding a state's performance (and by default non-performance) are made, and the failure to take into consideration the spatial variability of respective states' internal functionality (Carment & Samy 2011). Whilst there is, therefore, an awareness that states experience varying degrees of instability, for different lengths of time, and the overall implications of this differ, there is not a valid objective consensus as to the criteria that clearly indicates thresholds of insecurity, and where global, regional or localized governance structures are failing. States are therefore selectively assigned the 'weak' and 'failing' labels (Carment & Samy 2011, Sogge 2011).

The centrality of the 'state failure' concept to security studies had rescinded towards the turn of the century, however returned to pre-eminence after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks triggered a rhetorical convergence between 'state failure' and the 'War on Terror' (Rotberg 2002, Chan 2013). For example, U.S. President Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) declared, "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones" (Bush 2002, pg. 1), and the European Union's 2003 European Security Strategy outlined 'state failure' as one of Europe's key security threats (Council of the European Union 2003, pg. 4).

During this time, the shifting global political context altered the way in which the term was politicised, or even securitised (Krasner 2004, Hughes 2007). So not only is there a lack of awareness as to what constitutes 'state failure', the concept also doesn't adequately define what the referent object is to be secured. Much in line with the broadening and deepening notions of security, it can essentially be anything and everything. It is therefore determined through a constructivist lens by a process of politicization, or fundamentally through the framework of securitization, thereby shifting the referent object in accordance with the shifting international political context. In an empirical sense, these politicised, subjective, interpretations of state failure lead to the inconsistent application of the concept internationally. In the absence of objective criteria, this in turn determines the level of priority that global governance institutions assign to respond to insecurity within these political entities experiencing critical instability.

Implications of 'State Failure' for Security

Human Security

The security implications of 'state failure' can be operationalised locally, regionally and internationally, and in its purist form, 'failed states' concepts relate to the deprivation and suffering that transpires at each of these levels. The process of politicisation, or securitisation, occurs at the global governance level, whereby institutions assess and determine the security implications of 'weak', 'fragile' and/or 'failing states'. Yet when we place the population within

The Implications of State Failure on Security

Written by Rachael Aldridge

(and surrounding) these states as the referent objects to be secured, the objective nature of localised security threats materialises (Ignatieff 2005). These objective indicators do not, however, inform the higher-level subjective allocations of 'failing state' status, nor the response from key global governance institutions. From a human security perspective therefore, there is a fundamental disconnect between what is occurring at the local level and the way this is operationalized at the international level, leading to inconsistent international responses. As stated by Pape (2012, pg. 41), "which humanitarian crises justify international moral action and which do not?"

A human-centric product of 'state failure' is the often long-term deprivation and suffering brought about by violent political conflict, and the failure for governance structures to provide public goods (Mack 2004). When we assess the security implications of 'state failure' from a human-security perspective, the referent objects to be secured are the nation-state's local population. For example, as Somalia in the early 1990s, and Syria in 2012, descended into mass political violence and turmoil, the breakdown in effectiveness and legitimacy of the governance structures meant public goods or protection were not being provided for the nation's citizens, leading to widespread depravity and insecurity (Bruton 2009; Sharp & Blanchard 2012). Global governance institutions assigned 'failed state' status to these countries, and securitised the suffering these respective countries populations, for the political purpose of actioning a legitimate international humanitarian response. Yet this played out in very different ways. U.S. militarily intervened in Somalia, thus violating its external sovereignty, in an effort to stabilise the country, however withdrew as the operation became fatally embroiled in Somalia's violent political insecurity. Alternatively, humanitarian intervention in Syria was vetoed by the global institution responsible for international security, the UNSC, justified by invoking the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.

These zones of significant destabilisation can also cause: the mass displacement of populations who migrate to more stabilised regional areas in the interest of personal/familial security, such as Syrian refugees fleeing to border countries Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan; and the incapacity to adequately quarantine health issues, leading to the spread of disease, such as Liberia's incapacity to contain the spread of the Ebola Virus in early 2014, which has now been fatally transmitted to neighbouring populations in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Guinea.

Regime Security

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, regime type within states is integral to maintaining internal, and therefore external, sovereignty. The security implications of 'failing' governance structures include the increase in internal and external political competition, and can no longer monopolise legitimate threats to authority (Krause 2013). The regime within the 'failed state' is therefore the referent object in this case. Internally, violent insurgencies born out of "mutiny, rebellion or revolt" over state conditions (Jackson 2013, pg. 165) are a constant threat, whereby groups with significant coercive/infrastructural capacity launch a legitimate challenge for authority. In response, the "political parties become political militias" as the elites mobilise the military to secure the governing regime (Bates 2008, pg. 2). This, however, often provokes further resistance and challenges to the regime. Additionally, regimes of 'failing states' are susceptible to external challenges, as they lack the capacity to maintain external sovereignty, as more powerful actors intervene in their domestic affairs. This in turn enhances destabilization by perpetuating conflict and insecurity.

For example, the Charles Taylor-lead resistance movement in Liberia initiated a Civil War that continued throughout the 1990s, and eventually instituted his authoritarian government over which he presided into the 21st Century (Jackson 2013). Conversely, regionalised movements include the Arab Spring in early 2011, whereby insurgencies challenged established governments throughout the Middle East (particularly observed in Iraq) (Jackson 2013). By securitising the regime through a subjective, politicised process as a responses to these 'failed states', there are discrepancies in the actions taken to mitigate these localized objective security threats. As a result, even though we assigned the label of 'failure' to these fledgling states, the response manifests between securing or protecting the existing governance structure within the state (as was the case in Liberia), to supporting insurgencies against recalcitrant/aggressive government/non-state political entities (Hughes 2007) – for example, the Western powers supporting Kurdish forces against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Middle East.

State security

The Implications of State Failure on Security

Written by Rachael Aldridge

In the contemporary political system, powerful states are not able to ignore the insecurity caused by 'state failure', as the implications of destabilisation within these countries threatens – either materially, or existentially – their own security interests (Krasner 2004). States must therefore strategically align themselves to be in the most secure position relative to other states. From this perspective, the securitisation of underdevelopment in 'failed states', with states as the referent object, suggests the shifting global political context has triggered a reversion to a neo-realist approach. Importantly, however, the process of politicisation continues to be the framework we apply to assess 'state failure' and facilitate a response to the security implications that are generated. It is, therefore, still an overarching constructivist approach.

Placing the state as the referent object influences the way in which the security implications of 'state failure' are operationalized, and responded to, at an international level (Rotberg 2003). The most significant security risks include the development of terrorist networks, which thrive in the unstable and illegitimate conditions within these states. For example, Al'Qaeda developed a transnational terrorist network, with major hubs in the 'failed states' of Somalia and Afghanistan (Bruton 2008, Plummer 2012). Whilst these states were deemed to have 'failed' for some time, this post-9/11 period saw the U.S., its interests and allies securitised as the referent object, thereby legitimating a military response through the constructivist rubric of humanitarianism. Similarly, the regional security threat posed by ISIS in 2014, initially established as a regional insurgency, poses a violent threat to the populations predominantly within the 'failed states' Iraq and Syria; still, the international response has undergone this politicised process, securitising (again) the 'Western bloc' as the referent object of security, for the purpose of justifying a military response that violates the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.

Conclusion: The Utility of the 'State Failure' Concept

The notion of 'state failure' is analytically valid, yet empirically the concept has become an imperfect tool of global governance. It should provide a clear indicator of what actions should be taken, within what timeframe, to ameliorate particular security implications. Instead it is a term that is operationalised for a political purpose, to justify or legitimate levels of intervention or non-intervention. And whilst this is not necessarily a sinister political move – for example, it can be necessary to mobilise a humanitarian response to alleviate widespread suffering – in order to act in a decisive and timely manner, securitisation is necessary. The powerful, predominantly Western, states have trouble securitising, however, when the state is not the referent object. Given the objective realities of 'state failure' security implications are framed through a subjective and politicised process, the utility of the failed states concept would be enhanced by greater definitional consensus. This would manifest in more strategic, legitimate and effective institutional responses to the security implications caused by 'state failure', at the local, regional and international level.

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The Implications of State Failure on Security

Written by Rachael Aldridge

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The Implications of State Failure on Security

Written by Rachael Aldridge

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Written for: Dr David Malet and Mr Adam Berryman
Date written: November 2014