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States at Risk and Failed States

Putting Security First

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Failing and failed states present a grave danger to international stability as well as to the well-being of their populations. Internationally, they can become safe havens for terrorist organizations, centers for the trade of drugs and arms, and breeding grounds for dangerous diseases. Regionally, they can spill instability well past their borders and create a conflict dynamic affecting neighboring countries. Domestically, they cannot provide security for their citizens or deliver essential public goods. Beyond these immediate threats, failure of states also means the appearance of a growing number of stateless territories, a phenomenon with which the governments of Western countries are poorly prepared to deal. Despite all the astute reflections on the importance of non-state actors in international affairs and on the need to rethink the concept of sovereignty, states are still the central actors and units of global governance.

There is no doubt that failed and failing states present an international threat and require international intervention. Contrary to the developing consensus, however, such interventions should be narrowly focused, dealing above all with problems of state security. The ambitious models for intervention that are often advocated—models that emphasize human over state security—are too complex and costly to be implemented, and even in the best-case scenario would produce results only in the long run.

The real dangers posed by failing and failed states have led to calls for early international intervention to address the shortcomings of “states at risk” before they lead to failure and its consequences. Unfortunately, emerging ideas concerning how to deal with states at risk are often divorced from any realistic assessment of what could actually be done by members of the international community. The demand for external interventions to stabilize failing states or rebuild failed ones is quite large and resources available for these efforts are rather limited. But it is not only lack of resources which constrains the effectiveness of the international community, it is also the lack of knowledge of which approaches to the stabilization of fragile states work and which instruments are best suited to perform this task.

The international community has so far dealt with failing states in an ad hoc, piecemeal fashion, dealing with situations only after they have become critical. The magnitude and character of the response, furthermore, has been based on the extent to which particular crises have been perceived as threatening to the interests of countries in a position to intervene. The result is that interventions

have differed dramatically. At one extreme, Kosovo, a tiny territory of far less than 2 million people, which the international community is not even sure it wants to recognize as a state, has been the target of a well-funded, protracted intervention. In 1999, about 50,000 troops were deployed to stabilize Kosovo; five years later almost 20,000 soldiers remain there. The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo employs a civilian police force of 3,510, an international civilian staff of 820, and a local civilian staff of 2,737 and oversees a budget of \$329.74 million. At the other extreme, Rwanda was left to its own devices as 800,000 of its citizens were slaughtered in 1994. The small contingent of UN peacekeepers present in the country at the time was ordered to leave just after the genocide started. Neither approach can be used as a model. The Kosovo-style intervention has financial and manpower requirements that cannot be sustained by the international community except in isolated cases, and even then only in small countries—the application of the Kosovo model to a country such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is simply unthinkable. The option of inaction as practiced in Rwanda is unacceptable as well because of the horrendous human costs for the affected population. A sustainable approach to dealing with failing and failed states, applicable to large states as well as to small ones, remains elusive.

The Illusion of Early and Comprehensive Intervention

Conceptually, a consensus is developing around two ideas. First, interventions in weak states should start early, before the states begin to fail: prevention is, as usual, better than cure. Second, state weakness and impending failure must not be judged solely on the basis of the problems that threaten the security of the state, for example the existence of armed movements or high levels of ethnic strife. It must also be judged by conditions that threaten the physical integrity, welfare, self-determination, and opportunities of citizens—in other words, human security. The state's inability to deliver services or to institute the rule of law is as problematic, and potentially as threatening, a source of failure as is the state's inability to maintain secure borders or a monopoly over the means of coercion. Consensus on these two points leads analysts to formulate ambitious prescriptions for early interventions in all weak states. The goal of such interventions should be to promote economic development, increase state capacity to deliver services, foster good governance and rule of law, and reform the security sector in order to improve the state's capacity to maintain its security without undermining the rights of its citizens. Preventing state failure by such efforts is hardly a less ambitious concept than achieving human development in the broadest sense of the definition.

Such a comprehensive approach to states at risk, while commendable in theory, is beyond the international community's capacity to implement in practice. While the number of states that are clearly failing is relatively small, the number of states that must be considered potentially at risk for the purposes of early intervention is very large. There is hardly a low-income country that does not face the possibility of failure. Even some middle-income countries, such as Venezuela, Jordan, and Kazakhstan, qualify as states at risk. The former Yugoslavia, also a middle-income country, failed completely.

The feasibility of the comprehensive early intervention approach is called into question by more than the number of states potentially involved. Time is another issue, in two respects. First, it is quite difficult to convince decision makers to engage in state-building and stabilization measures long before the crisis of statehood in a given country becomes imminent and obvious. The experience with conflict prevention so far has shown clearly that early interventions are the exception and not the rule. Many projects have been devoted to the development of early-warning indicators of state failure, and many books and policy papers have been written about how to create the political will for early conflict prevention, but success has been limited. Faced with many present crises that require urgent attention, policymakers balk at also addressing possible future ones. Second, the

development of a state capable of delivering services efficiently, the economic growth necessary to underpin such services, and the political reform needed to institute rule of law and democracy are long term processes that cannot be accelerated to stave off the possibility of state failure. Even if it was possible to define precisely what reforms a particular weak state needs and that state started undertaking all of the reforms immediately, there is no guarantee that failure could be circumvented in time. Reform itself often proves destabilizing.

The problem of states at risk thus cannot be addressed by promoting comprehensive socio-economic and political reform over the long run in order to eliminate the potential for failure in the short run. Even if the resources and the knowledge for achieving sustainable and comprehensive development were available, the security problems and destabilizing effects of state failure would demand action that bears fruit quickly. This does not mean that the long-term, underlying problems of economic development and good governance are not important. The promotion of human security and human development are fundamental tasks that the international community must address in all low-income countries, on a sustained basis and to the best of its capacity.

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that human development has been the goal of international assistance for half a century with only uncertain success and that a viable approach to promote human security is still very much a work in progress. Thus, the international community cannot rely on such uncertain endeavors to prevent state failure. Long-term commitment to poverty reduction, economic growth, and service delivery should be considered a constant in the relationship between industrialized and developing countries. Interventions to stabilize a state at risk are a different matter: they should be undertaken only in special circumstances, last only as long as they are absolutely needed, and focus narrowly on the urgent problems that threaten the stability of a state. The danger of state failure must be addressed by dealing directly with its immediate origins rather than the underlying, chronic problems.

The most important manifestations of state failure are the breakdown of internal security and the increasing inability of the state to control borders and territory and to exert its monopoly on the use of force. Interventions to prevent the failure of states at risk should focus more narrowly on restoring the state's capacity to perform these tasks. Focusing on restoring or developing a state capable of maintaining security does not address all questions concerning what a state should be or should do in today's world. Security could be maintained by a democratic state as well as by an authoritarian one, by a lean state focusing on law and order and basic administration as well as by a welfare state. There are many issues open to ideological debate and subject to intensely political choices. But all states and even protostates have a common characteristic: they must maintain security. Security alone is not sufficient to ensure development and self-determination but without it neither can be achieved.

Security First

Even the more limited task of maintaining or restoring the security of failing and failed states is a difficult undertaking, one for which the international community is not well-prepared. Until the end of the Cold War, the issue of restoring state security in weak countries received limited attention. State security was equated with regime security. The concern of the superpowers and former colonial powers intervening in weak states was to keep in power friendly regimes, with little regard for the long-term consequences for the stability or even the survival of the state. There is no evidence that the United States ever worried about the impact of Mobutu Sese Seko on the Zairean state or that the Soviet Union wondered whether Mohammed Siad Barre was dismantling Somalia.

The end of the two-bloc confrontation brought about two changes. First, the artificial stability of many weak states was shaken by their patrons' loss of interest. Donors refused authoritarian leaders the resources they desperately needed to finance the security apparatus and the expensive and inefficient patronage network on which they relied to stay in power. Instead, donors demanded not only economic deregulation, as they already had done throughout the 1980s, but also political reform, most notably the introduction of multiparty systems and the holding of elections.

Second, the attempts to maintain or restore state stability became internationalized. With internationalization, the focus of interventions also changed from putting in place a government friendly to the intervenors to putting in place a government capable of controlling the territory, governing the country well, safeguarding the rights of its citizens, and promoting economic development. The result was a sharp increase in the number of UN and other international missions in troubled states, as well as an escalation of expectations about what such missions were supposed to accomplish. The early post-Cold War UN intervention in Cambodia (1992–93) aimed only at administering the country for two years and supervising the elections; it ended once an elected government was in place. The international mission in Kosovo, on the other hand, has already lasted almost five years and is open-ended in terms of time as well as outcome. Although the international community officially considers the territory to be part of Serbia, it is de facto trying to build a state with democratic institutions and rule of law, as well as a new civil society and a new economy.

The Kosovo mission, which built on the international experience in Bosnia, has become for many the blueprint of intervention in failed states from which an ideal model should be derived. In reality, Kosovo might serve at best as a template for interventions in small countries to which wealthy members of the international community attach a great deal of importance. As a general model, it is simply unsustainable. It is too costly and it requires too much military and civilian personnel and an open-ended time commitment. If the prevention of state failure and the restoration of security in failing states is a task the international community is to be prepared to undertake regularly, it is important to develop a more practical approach. The starting point in developing such an approach must be an analysis of the types of security challenges with which failing states are confronted.

Most significant is the military challenge. African states in particular have proven prone to failure caused by the activity of armed opposition groups that seize control over parts of the territory or at least deprive the government of effective control over it. What is striking in such cases is the ragtag nature of the organizations that challenge the government, the speed with which they can cause state failure, and the ease with which even modest international interventions have restored security in some cases. Over the last sixteen years, governments in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the DRC, and the Ivory Coast have lost control of much territory to insurgents with very weak organization and fighting ability. These governments were not confronted by the equivalent of war-hardened Vietcong backed by the North Vietnamese government, but by bands of poorly armed, trained, and commanded child soldiers, petty criminals, drug addicts, and desperados, and still they lost. In some cases, as in the DRC in 1998, a country was conquered with hardly any fighting—Laurent Kabila could march across the Congo and become president not because the Tutsis and Ugandans that backed him provided an awesome fighting apparatus, but because the DRC no longer had an army.

The example of Sierra Leone shows clearly how some African insurgencies are dangerous less because of their strength than because of the weakness of the state they challenge. Eight hundred British paratroopers were enough to restore a degree of security in Sierra Leone after years of chaos. The intervention of this force was enough to set the peace process in Sierra Leone back on track. It is too early to claim that Mission Artemis, the UN-mandated and EU-led intervention of 1,400 troops in the northeastern DRC in 2003, achieved the same degree of success. But at least it stopped the escalation of violence at a critical moment, preventing a humanitarian disaster. Genocide in

Rwanda could also probably have been prevented by a small international force: General Romeo Dellaire, the force commander of the UN mission in Rwanda in 1994, has argued that a few hundred committed, well-trained peacekeepers endowed with a strong mandate would have been sufficient to destroy the operational capabilities of the Hutu militias. Later, determined action against the *genocidaires* who controlled the refugee camps of the eastern Congo could have deprived Uganda and Rwanda of any pretext to intervene in the neighbouring country militarily. The lesson taught by all these cases is that the deployment of well-trained, -equipped, and -commanded troops at a critical moment can effectively prevent the escalation of a conflict and state collapse. The British-French-German initiative to set up so-called battle groups capable of quick intervention is a positive sign that Europeans have learned this lesson and are moving to implement it.

Even if these European battle groups and similar special forces are established, military intervention will remain a difficult option, likely to be exercised in an inconsistent manner. It is hardly possible to define all factors that motivate members of the international community to support interventions. Certainly, countries are more inclined to intervene when their own security or interests are directly affected. This explains, for example, why the United States did not hesitate to intervene in Afghanistan, where a failed state had been taken over by a terrorist organization with demonstrated capacity and willingness to attack the United States. It does not explain why the United States and the United Nations were willing to intervene in Somalia, or why it took a long time, and a lot of pressure from the United States, for European countries to take a strong stand on Bosnia, on their own doorstep. The so-called CNN effect, often invoked in cases where self-interest and perceived threat do not offer an adequate explanation of intervention, is in reality a rare occurrence. Television coverage of a humanitarian disaster led to intervention in Somalia, but not in Rwanda, where the mass slaughter was amply reported, or in Sudan, where the gravity of the killings has been documented for years. The only clear conclusion that can be drawn is that military interventions are highly selective, and that they cannot be explained by a single factor. It is not a foregone conclusion that mechanisms can ever be put in place to ensure international intervention even when the security and human costs of inaction are especially high.

Despite the successes of the British in Sierra Leone and of Mission Artemis in the DRC, the outcomes of military interventions to prevent state failure are quite varied and at times contradictory. Seemingly benign interventions, like the one by the United States and the United Nations in Somalia, can become suddenly quite violent and turn the intervenor into a party to the conflict. A general lesson seems to be that military interventions should be launched quickly and have from the beginning adequate strength anchored by the presence of a major power. The latter is crucial, in that it sends to the parties to the conflict a message that the international community is paying close attention to the issue.

Military interventions to maintain and restore state security grab headlines and receive a disproportionate amount of attention, as well as absorb a disproportionate amount of resources. However, they are not the preferable solution and can be avoided if the members of the international community take steps before the situation degenerates to the point where stabilization requires the use of coercion. We expressed skepticism earlier about the feasibility and effectiveness of early actions to address comprehensively the socio-economic and governance problems of states at risk. Confined to the security sector, however, early interventions can be an important means of preventing state failure.

Most states at risk are not challenged by armed insurgents or secessionist movements. Their security problems result from the breakdown of law and order in peripheral border regions and urban slums, and from the spread of organized crime and criminal violence. The threat is compounded by the corruption and lack of capacity of the police forces, which leave a vacuum of power that is then filled

by private security companies, vigilantes, and youth militias. In such cases, stabilization requires security sector reform, which must be tailored to conditions in each state. The most ambitious, comprehensive approaches to security sector reform encompass the restructuring, re-equipping and retraining of armed forces, police, security services, and intelligence, as well as the strengthening of civilian oversight agencies. Such comprehensive reform is well beyond the short-term capacity of many weak states. Here, as in all other sectors of state failure, the countries that are the most in need of reform also have the least capacity to implement it. On the other hand, states that have no capacity to maintain security will remain at risk no matter what other reforms they implement. Thus, devising an implementable, focused approach to security-sector reform should be a prime task of external intervention in states at risk.

The downside to the improved capacity of a state to maintain security is that the government also acquires greater capacity to ensure its own survival by suppressing legitimate civilian opposition. If the DRC in 1998 had still possessed the capacity to maintain security, the intervention by Rwanda and Uganda would have been prevented, but the Mobutu regime would also have been kept in power. If Kenya's security forces had been more effective in the 1990s they might have controlled the spread of organized crime, prevented the smuggling of arms across the border, contained cattle rustling, and stopped the emergence of youth gangs in the slums; they would have also been in a far better position to disperse street protest, as well as to identify regime adversaries and jail them, thus reducing the prospects for a political transition. In countries with particularly egregious regimes, true stabilization may require regime change; thus the state's short-term capacity to maintain stability may prevent long-term stabilization. On the other hand, state failure can have such far-reaching and long-lasting negative consequences that it cannot be lightly accepted even if it leads to the disappearance of an undesirable regime.

When States Fail

Improvements in the security sector will not prevent state failure everywhere. Nor will the international community summon the will to intervene militarily when states are truly on the brink, particularly if the country is large and does not constitute a real security threat to foreign powers with the capacity to intervene. Bearing in mind the limited resources and political will for intervention, intervention's risks and costs, and the resistance of the governments of failing states to implement the changes indispensable for reversing the process of state failure, it is unavoidable that some states will collapse.

The dilemma confronting the international community then becomes whether to accept the failure of a particular state or to attempt to reconstruct it within its old borders. The bias built into the international system at present is that failed states should be rebuilt. In some cases, however, international acceptance that the failure of a particular state is permanent and willingness to recognize its successors would do more to protect human security.

Three major manifestations of state failure exist. One is the splitting of a country into different entities, as one or more secessionist movements succeed in taking over part of the territory and form functioning new states—this happened, for example, when Ethiopia failed to maintain control over all its territory and the Eritrean insurgents declared the independence of Eritrea in 1991. State failure can also occur as the result of the annexation of part or all of the territory by a neighboring state—a recent example is the annexation by Morocco of Western Sahara. The third is the disappearance of any central authority, with the territory de facto being parcelled out among a heterogeneous mix of traditional authorities, religious leaders, warlords, and even nongovernmental organizations, which start performing some state functions at the local level. This happened in Somalia, for example, and in Afghanistan before the Taliban imposed control over at least one part of the country.

The first two forms of state failure constitute a legal and political, rather than practical, problem for the international community. If a relatively orderly state emerges, as in Eritrea or Somaliland, human security is not at risk. Nevertheless, international law allows the reconfiguration of borders only under very special circumstances. Neither conquest by a neighboring country nor secession is a legally recognized reason for border modification. The issue of border modification needs rethinking. While the redrawing of borders is not a panacea, it should also not be automatically ruled out as a means for rebuilding viable states and thus restoring human security. In practice, the international community has pragmatically accepted border modification as a result of secession in many countries since the end of the Cold War—in the Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Ethiopia. Paradoxically, most of these examples of border modification have occurred in relatively consolidated and capable states. In those regions where statehood is at its frailest and most problematic, particularly in Africa, the international community is particularly insistent on maintaining the territorial status quo.

The third form of failure poses the greatest challenge. Rebuilding states that have collapsed into mosaics of local authorities is extremely difficult, as the history of Somalia in the last fifteen years shows. But accepting the de facto disappearance of the state is also problematic, because statelessness destroys human security and places tight restrictions on socio-economic development—lack of security, of reliable rules for economic and social interaction, and of an agency which feels responsible for the provision of physical infrastructure make normal life and economic activity extremely difficult in stateless territories. Some form of state needs to be rebuilt. The failure of efforts to rebuild the state from the top, through international intervention, suggests the need to support efforts that start at the bottom. A starting point is the creation or expansion of networks of local actors and their closer integration, but without any preconceived plan to restore the state as it was in the past. Support for protostate formations, such as the one that is emerging in Somaliland, can also be a way to restore human security. From that point of view, a relatively functioning Somaliland is good enough, and probably easier to achieve than a restored Somalia.

A major problem the international community faces in the attempt to deal with failed states is the choice of partners. There are often actors who seem to respect essential rules of civilized behavior—for example, democratic nongovernmental organizations or village elders—but have very little access to means of coercion, thus little power and effectiveness in the rough world of collapsed states. Yet the real powerholders, no matter how distasteful a bunch they might be, cannot be ignored, because they have the capacity to spoil any effort at reconstructing new viable political entities, large or small. Any effort to build the state from below has to deal with these noncivil forces. The options range from co-opting to controlling or fighting them. The choice of an adequate strategy depends on the character of the noncivil forces and the resources available for intervention.

Conclusion

The international community does not have the resources, the political will, or the know-how to mount early, comprehensive interventions that attempt to strengthen the social, economic, and political fabric of every state that gives early signs of incipient failure. It should as much as possible intervene to restore security in states at risk because state failure has dramatic consequences for human security, but interventions must be narrowly focused rather than comprehensive. Furthermore, some states should be allowed to fail if it has become clear that the survival of the state comes at the expense of the survival of its citizens.

The choice of whether or how forcefully to intervene to prevent failure, or whether to simply accept the collapse of a particular state, is usually a pragmatic decision made by potential intervenors on the grounds of national interest, the potential negative consequences of state failure, and the probability

of success of the intervention. The triage process that takes place on the basis of these criteria is far from perfect. Above all, potential intervenors can make very costly errors of judgement regarding the potential threat to their national interest emanating from certain countries and the political and human costs of nonintervention. The United States' error of judgement in dismissing Afghanistan as an unimportant country after the withdrawal of Soviet forces and the fall of the Soviet Union cost it dearly with the September 11 attacks and more broadly with the growth of Al Qaeda and international terrorism. The international failure to take seriously the initial massacres of April 1994 in Rwanda eventually led to genocide and became a major cause of war in the DRC four years later.

Another way of dealing with the gap between limited resources and extraordinary demand for stabilizing states is to develop a clearer international division of labor, both functionally and geographically. Those favoring a functional division of labor believe that the United States should focus on fighting wars and enforcing peace, while European countries and to some extent regional organizations should concentrate on peacekeeping, reconstruction, and development aid—tasks less controversial politically and better suited to countries that are more reluctant to use military means. In reality, such functional division of labor is unlikely to work except in the rare instances in which both the United States and European countries regard state failure as a threat to their national interests. This would give the United States sufficient justification to risk the lives of its troops and European countries an incentive to perform what some see as a somewhat humiliating task of doing the clean-up job after the United States has deployed its military might. Even if the transatlantic tensions and resentments could be managed, such functional division of labor would not help Africa, the region with the highest number of states at risk, which is not considered of sufficient strategic importance by the United States. A regional division of labor might work in the more strategically peripheral regions, that is, a special engagement of the United States in Latin America, of Europe in Africa, and of Japan and Australia in South-East Asia as well as in the Pacific.

Putting security first, devising more effective ways for the international community to deploy inevitably insufficient resources in states that are truly threatened with failure, and accepting the inevitability and even the benefits of state collapse in some instances may help control the negative consequences of state failure for the global order. However, none of these steps will solve the crucial problem of human security for those directly affected by state failure. That problem can only be addressed in the very long run by a sustained process of economic development and political change that builds the foundations for strong, well-governed states. The effort to promote such political and economic change must remain a central concern of the richer countries and efforts have to increase from the present unsatisfactory level. It is important, however, not to confuse the short-term, intensive interventions needed to stabilize states acutely at risk, which should be timely but of short duration, with the long-term commitment that needs to be made to all countries where human security is at risk because of poverty and poor government. ■

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