

The Decline of the Nation-State

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FOR CENTURIES, the sovereign state has been the dominant form of political organization in the Western world. The most successful variant of the state was the nation-state, which harnessed the power of nationalism and was eventually exported around the world. Today, there are more than 200 nation-states. But, as I will argue, the nation-state is a declining institution. Threatened by different political structures, violent enemies and the waning of nationalism, the state must adapt or die – and in the process it may transform into something unrecognizable, something which doesn't fit on our neatly delineated maps. The first part of this essay explores possible reasons for the decline of the nation-state. The second part examines ideas about the political structures likely to supersede the nation-state.

In order to define the nation-state, I will use John Stuart Mill's definition of a nation:

A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a Nationality if they are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others — which make them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by themselves or a portion of themselves exclusively.¹

A nation is a common identity which demands political loyalty. Language, culture, history and religion can all contribute to national identity, but the distinguishing feature of a nation is the desire for self-government. A sovereign state exists in an abstract, legal way as a political system with a permanent population, government, international recognition and a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within an exclusive territory. The concept of legitimacy means that people accept, and tacitly consent to, their government. According to David Runciman, the state is fictional: “it owes both its existence and its power to the fact that it is never to be identified with anyone, or anything, in particular.”² Because a state exists mainly as a mental construct, it cannot operate without some legitimacy. A state which gains legitimacy from its claim to represent a nation is a nation-state.

1 John Stuart Mill. *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Chapter 16.

2 David Runciman. “The concept of the state: the sovereignty of a fiction,” in *States and Citizens: History, Theory, Prospects*, ed., Bo Stråth and Quentin Skinner, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), pp. 28-38.

According to this definition, a political entity cannot be classed as a nation-state if the citizens are not primarily loyal to the nation, if the state does not possess a monopoly of legitimate force, if sovereignty is substantially given up to transnational organizations and markets, or if nationalism stops providing state legitimacy. I will endeavour to prove that these conditions are beginning to apply to contemporary states.

Most of the trends discussed in this section are related to globalization: a process of deepening global connectivity and interdependence. The process also combines integration and fragmentation; James Rosenau termed this “framegration.”³ Integration can be thought of as shifting state sovereignty upwards, into transnational structures; fragmentation represents the state losing power to subnational groups.

Globalization undermines the basis for nation-state legitimacy – loyalty to the nation. In the 18th and 19th centuries, nationalism was a romantic, unifying ideology. When Napoleon harnessed the power of nationalism with the *levée en masse*, his armies swept across Europe. But today, nationalism has lost its vitality: the nation-state has lost control over the minds of its citizens. State censorship previously ensured that governments could enforce secrecy and cover-up potentially embarrassing stories. Symbols of nationhood were reinforced in state education, and means of communication could easily be controlled by the state. Ideas which threatened the nation-state barely had the chance to spread. Modern communications have reversed the situation. Philip Bobbitt argued: “More than any other development it is the increased influence of the news media that has delegitimated the state,⁴” by encouraging cynicism toward politics. The state cannot enforce secrecy: prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib was revealed after photos taken with cellphone cameras were leaked. The state cannot protect culture from foreign competition, as Hollywood movies flood world markets. Culture has become deterritorialized. New loyalties supplant nationalism, as people learn that they often have more in common with foreigners than their compatriots. Whether the Religious Right or the anti-globalizing left, transnational movements are increasingly involved in domestic politics. In response, governments and politicians rely more and more on advertising agencies and spin doctors, reducing state sovereignty to a mere simulation.

van Creveld called the result the “crisis of legitimacy,” Bobbitt the “crisis of legitimation.” Jean-Marie Guehenno wrote: “the common space of politics has lost its legitimacy.”⁵ The decline of interstate war, inability to ensure internal security, transnational threats, economic globalization and global communications all play a part in the crisis of legitimacy,

3 James N. Rosenau. “Illusions of Power and Empire,” *History and Theory, Theme Issue 44* (December 2005), pp. 73-87.

4 Philip Bobbitt. *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*, (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 226.

5 Jean-Marie Guéhenno, (translated by Victoria Elliot). *The End of the Nation-State*, (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1995), p. 12.

according to these authors – a surprising agreement given that their analyses are otherwise very different.

There have been no wars between the great powers since 1945. The main reason for this, according to Bobbitt and van Creveld, is nuclear proliferation. There were wars between Egypt et. al. and Israel, India and Pakistan, but not after Israel and India developed nuclear weapons. Those conflicts continued, however, as proxy wars with non-state guerrillas, against whom nuclear deterrence is meaningless. The second reason for the obsolescence of great-power war is economic interdependence: war potentially cuts off access to global markets, creating uncertainty and discouraging investment. But this factor should not be exaggerated. China is locked in a military standoff with Taiwan, despite massive Taiwanese investment in China.

War once played a significant part in promoting nationalism and increasing state power. The military teaches nationalism, and the bonds of camaraderie forged during war promote national unity. New Zealand's predominant symbol of nationhood is Gallipoli, despite that battle being a military disaster. The form of war favoured by nation-states became known as “total war” - war not to defeat a state, but to defeat a nation. Strategic bombing was the culmination of this trend. But with the waning of interstate warfare, that trend ended. The new trend is to place ever-greater value on human life. It took the deaths of more than 50,000 soldiers to force a US withdrawal from Vietnam in the 1970s, 240 before withdrawing from Lebanon in the 1980s, and just 18 killed before being driven out of Somalia in 1994. America's willingness to take casualties declined by at least an order of magnitude in each decade. Correspondingly, the willingness to inflict casualties has declined as well, and Allied bombing in the Second World War is commonly considered a war-crime.

As the nation-state declines in importance, it faces a loss of sovereignty from above (to transnational actors) and below (to subnational actors). The transnational actors can be classed as Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), transnational corporations (TNCs) and many smaller players. Consider state sovereignty over the market, which was once taken for granted. The prime example of an IGO is the United Nations. The UN system includes several economic IGOs, such as the IBRD (World Bank), the IMF, various standards agencies and the WTO. States which accept loans from the IMF or IBRD must accept “conditionality,” whereby foreign economists implement domestic economic reforms. But no state which is part of the global economic system can set its own tariffs or standards, or even internal regulations if they are deemed a barrier to trade. TNCs and other players in the markets also have a say: the deterritorialization of capital enables TNCs to move to the state with the most favourable policies. Capital flows instantly judge the fiscal performance of states, further restricting their ability to act in the economic sphere. This loss of economic sovereignty can lead to a concurrent loss of legitimacy, because citizens still have an expectation that the state can

manage economic growth⁶.

Transnational civil society involves INGOs, often working with and lobbying both IGOs and national governments. A successful example was the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Before the campaign began, landmines were considered a legitimate weapon. But with adroit use of media techniques such as “priming” and “framing,” shocking statistics, emotive images and celebrity endorsement, a new international norm was created, and in an unprecedentedly short period of time the ban on landmines became international law⁷. INGOs have also been involved in organizing mass protests to depose undemocratic governments. Billionaire investor George Soros began the Soros Foundations to oppose Soviet rule, and, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, founded the Open Society Institute to coordinate the foundations. The Open Society Institute was one of several INGOs involved in supporting local NGOs in coordinating the mass protests which successfully overthrew the Yugoslav government in 2000. In 2003, the similar Rose Revolution took place in Georgia. Ukraine's Orange Revolution and Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution followed. Russia criticised the actions of the NGOs as reflecting Western imperialism, and Belarus and Uzbekistan brutally crushed anti-government protests, fearing a repeat of the color revolutions.

The examples of the color revolutions and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines illustrate how determined individuals and groups can effect change, even against state opposition. Common elements include the use of information technology and networked, non-hierarchical organization. The media was essential to the success of the revolutions and the landmine campaign. In particular, the color revolutions relied on the hope that government forces would not violently break up the protests with the world media watching.

Unfortunately, terrorists and other violent non-state actors use the same elements of globalization and communications networks to their advantage. The increased power that small networks can wield, thanks to ever-improving technology, reduces the relative power of states and directly threatens their monopoly of force. After 1989, as the Soviet Union collapsed and many Third World dictatorships were destabilized by the cutoff of superpower aid, there was an epidemic of state failure. While most of the all-out civil wars from that period have ended, restoring state sovereignty has proved difficult or impossible, and often the very nature of the state has changed. The results are not nation-states, and sometimes not states at all. And these changes are not restricted to Third World dictatorships: Western liberal democracies are also threatened by transnational terrorism, insurgency, crime and communal violence, and as Philip Bobbitt warned: “The mobilization of the industrial capacity of a nation is irrelevant to such threats; the fielding of vast tank

6 Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles*, p. 222.

7 Kenneth R. Rutherford. “The Evolving Arms Control Agenda: Implications of the Role of NGOs in Banning Antipersonnel Landmines,” *World Politics*, vol. 53 (October 2000) 74-114.

armies and fleets of airplanes is as clumsy as a bear trying to fend off bees.⁸

Transnational terrorism was enabled by globalization; in particular, by cheap air travel and televised news. Media coverage was “the oxygen that sustains terrorism⁹.” The need for international legitimacy and sympathy was a limitation on the level of terrorist violence. Another limitation was diminishing returns in terms of media coverage: this necessitates larger and more spectacular attacks, for example, moving from single airline hijackings to simultaneous airline hijackings followed by blowing up the airliners on live TV, as occurred in 1970 in Jordan. Terrorism in the 1970s was reliant on state support, especially support by the Soviet Union. After the end of the Cold War the militant Islamic movement became the main driver of terrorism, and it became truly transnational: attacks could be planned in Afghanistan, funded in Saudi Arabia, and carried out anywhere from New York to Nairobi to Bali. Worryingly, religious terrorism is not limited by the desire to gain legitimacy or sympathy, as was the case when terrorism was primarily nationalist or communist in motivation. Nationalism has declined as a motivation for terrorists, as the examples of Irish and Basque nationalist movements have shown. In fact, nationalism and the nation-state are both increasingly irrelevant to contemporary terrorists: successful counterterrorism requires intergovernmental or transnational action, because norms of state sovereignty act to shield terrorists: when they can cross borders, their state pursuers cannot follow. Therefore we see transnational terrorist groups operating out of weak states, and attacked by coalitions, alliances and IGOs: for example, the escalating war between NATO and resurgent Al-Qaeda and Taliban elements in Southern Afghanistan.

The limitations of the nation-state in responding to insurgency were demonstrated by wars in Vietnam, Algeria, and many other Cold War proxy conflicts or wars of decolonization – conflicts that were motivated by the desire of the occupied people to establish a nation-state. Insurgency since then has developed into a new kind of war, which goes by various names including fourth-generation war or “4GW” according to some military theorists such as T.X. Hammes¹⁰ and “new wars” according to Mary Kaldor¹¹. These wars are characterized by non-state combatants. The advantage of insurgents is that they develop a networked organization resistant to disruption. A loose but resilient network structure is not only harder to disrupt, but more innovative and adaptive than a strictly hierarchical organization. Some contemporary insurgent groups have realized the advantages of the network and have given up entirely on the ambition to set up a state. For example, the war in Iraq differs from other insurgencies in that the insurgents have not attempted to set up a parallel government. Some Iraqi insurgents even seem intent on provoking civil war to

8 Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles*.

9 James D. Kiras. “Terrorism and globalization,” in *The Globalization of World Politics*. ed., John Baylis and Steve Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 483.

10 Thomas X. Hammes. *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century*, (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004).

11 Mary Kaldor. *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

cause an American withdrawal. The goal is state failure, which would create a power vacuum which various networks – including transnational terrorists – could exploit. Hezbollah in Lebanon was capable of defeating the Lebanese government, but preferred to occupy small areas, establish political and social-welfare wings to gain support, and wage war against Israel, with the existing Lebanese government as a barrier to effective retaliation. Perhaps another reason for this phenomenon, though, is the decline of nationalism.

While these problems might seem distant to New Zealanders, Guehenno warned of increasing “Lebanization” even in Western countries¹². His thesis is that nationalism is defined by territory, but territory is declining in importance due to globalization. Guehenno contrasts the nation and the community. While a nation demands a state with sovereignty over territory, separate communities could coexist, interlinked, on the same territory, as long as each had their own laws and chiefs. In Lebanon, nationalism failed to unite disparate communities, resulting in bloody civil war. “The logic of the communal sharing of power and the logic of popular sovereignty” could not coexist¹³. As nationalism declines in the West, will it be replaced by communalism? Guehenno warns that the alienation of modern life will lead some to “find difference in a search for origins.” Bobbitt, however, sees in nationalism itself a threat of ethnic conflict: “we will inevitably get a multicultural state when the nation-state loses its legitimacy as the provider and guarantor of equality.¹⁴” A nation-state gains legitimacy from the support of the nation – usually a single ethnic group – and it must promote the interests of that nation. Thus, there is a potential conflict between equality and national identity. This danger is exacerbated by air travel: immigrants can maintain strong links with their home countries, reducing the incentive to create links with their adopted country, and sometimes exporting and importing terrorism and war. In Europe, large, unassimilated Muslim populations have proved fertile recruiting ground for terrorists, as well as a threat to public order as immigrant youths riot and form criminal gangs.

Transnational criminal organizations are another threat to state sovereignty. Moises Naim warns that globalization has empowered international crime to have unprecedented effects: “Networks of stateless traders in illicit goods are changing the world as much as terrorists are – probably more. But a world obsessed with terrorists has not yet taken notice.¹⁵” Like terrorism, transnational crime cannot be halted by individual states. And like terrorism, it blurs the boundary between war and crime; and thus, the boundary between military and police action. Even in New Zealand, the government cannot stop the manufacture of pure methamphetamine or “P.” Raids on P manufacturers and distributors have frequently uncovered illegal firearms and even caches of explosives. Illicit traffickers and forgers are

12 Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, p. 35.

13 Ibid., p. 39-40.

14 Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles*, p. 225.

15 Moises Naim. *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy*, (London: William Heinemann, 2006). p.6.

vital to the success of terrorist and insurgent groups anywhere. Worryingly, there was a criminal network centered in Pakistan which exported nuclear technology and designs to “rogue states.” The sheer volume of trade makes it impossible to search every ship, let alone every container.

A common response to the above threats – terrorism, insurgency, ethnic tensions, and transnational crime – is the privatization of security. To van Creveld, the proliferation of gated communities and private security firms¹⁶ is a sign of the weakness of modern states – because security is the most important function of government – and he predicts that police, prisons and even courts will increasingly be contracted out. The trend is more noticeable in wars, however. Private contractors, most employed by the US, make up the second largest foreign armed group in Iraq. While many contractors drive trucks or cook meals at US bases, top US officials are guarded by highly-paid, ex-Special Forces contractors. Increasingly, private guards find themselves on the front line of the war: nearly 700 have been killed so far. Private Military Corporations (PMCs) only date back to the 1990s¹⁷. Before then, mercenaries were undisciplined individuals hired on an irregular basis. Modern-day mercenaries are highly-paid, highly-trained employees of legal, transnational corporations. What does this mean for the sovereign nation-state? The UN ban on mercenaries is actually a nation-state institution – the wording implies that risking your life is only legitimate if it is for your own nation. And PMCs are often seen as a threat to state sovereignty: this was the situation in Papua New Guinea in 1996, when the military mutinied rather than allow the government to use mercenaries against rebels on Bougainville, citing the threat to legitimacy posed by allowing foreigners to kill PNG citizens. While PMCs are usually used by states, the cost to legitimacy may outweigh the immediate benefits. The prevalence of private military forces demonstrates the loosening state hold on the monopoly of force, and the inability of states to wage war in traditional nation-state ways – perhaps because they can no longer rely on nationalism as a motivation to fight.

In this section I have shown that the nation-state is a declining institution worldwide, due to the influence of globalization, communications networks, and modern technology. Communications links allow anti-state ideas to spread, and new networks to organize. Transnational threats force states to give up power – especially economic power – to intergovernmental bodies and markets, and global civil society seeks to influence politics. More violent non-state threats are emerging: terrorism, insurgency, and transnational crime, for example, all adapted to exploit state weakness. In response, states have ceded even more sovereignty to IGOs and contracted to private military corporations to assist in providing security. According to how I have defined a nation-state – citizens loyal to the nation, monopoly of legitimate force, sovereignty, nationalism providing legitimacy to the state – many contemporary “states” are not nation-states, and many others are borderline.

16 Van Creveld, *Rise and Decline of the State*, p. 408.

17P. W. Singer. *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). p. 9.

Some are not states at all.

So what is replacing the nation-state? What new political structures and forms of governance will develop? The second section of this essay considers concepts including the market-state, global governance, empire, networks and neo-medievalism.

Philip Bobbitt's conception of the future of the state is the "market-state." Just as the nation-state derived legitimacy from the nation, the market-state derives legitimacy by facilitating market access for its citizens. The market-state will solve the "crisis of legitimation" by "redefining the fundamental compact on which the assumption of legitimate power is based."¹⁸ The market-state would aim to maximise opportunities, and it would govern using markets and incentive systems, privatization, limited government, and reduced involvement by citizens. It would be a multi-cultural, colourblind state, but because it would not recognize culture, citizens would feel little loyalty to it. Reduced state involvement in security could result in a "mixture of devolution and privatization."¹⁹ Clearly, Bobbitt has extrapolated from various current trends, but perhaps in an idealized way. There might be far more variety, and far more conflict, than Bobbitt envisages. He also doesn't take into account widespread opposition to global capitalism and the related backlash against modernism.

Global governance is another idealized view of the future of states, based not on world government, but cooperation between governments, IGOs and transnational civil society to solve global problems. From International Organizations" "None of these problems can be managed by sovereign states acting alone... All require cooperation of some sort among governments and the increasing number of non-state actors in the world."²⁰ Global governance includes international law, norms, structures, mechanisms and regimes; both formal and informal. I see two problems with global governance: legitimacy and security. Without a widely accepted source of legitimacy, global governance will be seen as undemocratic as it becomes more involved with state functions. As for security, the institutions comprising global governance would be just as vulnerable to the various violent threats discussed earlier as a nation-state, and IGOs have historically been ineffective at wielding military force. So while global governance has a role in dealing with transnational threats, it would be unlikely to be effective at a local level. Mary Kaldor's idea for "cosmopolitan law enforcement"²¹ attempts to solve this difficulty with an international military force capable of humanitarian intervention, with a changed norm of sovereignty. However, removing the protection of sovereignty is opposed by many states, and would be criticized as imperialistic. More realistic is to hope for regional powers to lead interventions in failed states, as Australia and New Zealand did in Timor and the Solomons.

18 Bobbitt..*The Shield of Achilles*, p. 216.

19 Ibid. p. 237

20 Margaret P. Karns, and Karen A. Mingst. *International Organisations: The Politics and Processes of Global Governance*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), p. 3.

21 Kaldor *New and Old Wars*, p. 147.

Empire was historically a very common way of organizing human societies. An empire is a highly debated, vague concept, but it seems agreed that it is a structure “heterogeneous by definition²²” and maintained in a more or less coercive way. According to Guehenno, Europe can be considered an empire, and the world will become imperialistic but networked after the nation-state. Guehenno considers an empire to be less definite than a nation-state, with “an uncertain margin.²³” This kind of empire would be fluid and flexible, with “diffuse and continuous,²⁴” but not intense, violence. In some ways the pervasive networks would increase vulnerability, multiplying “the possible points of attack.²⁵” Guehenno's idea is radically decentralized and capitalist – far less centralized than the traditional definition of empire, or Bobbitt's market-state. It is a similar idea to James Rosenau's “fragmeigration,” in which transnational and subnational groups simultaneously gain power, resulting in decentralization within an overarching framework: exactly the pattern currently seen in the European Union. Not only in Europe but on the margins, new states have been created and many regions have been granted more autonomy, in a remarkably peaceful process by world standards. With all of Europe covered by the EU and with little economic independence, there is no gain in efficiency for Scotland or Catalonia to be ruled from London or Madrid.

However, Rosenau rejects the idea of empire, favouring the “network” or “networked individual” as the future locus of power. Rosenau's argument is that empire requires centralized power exerted by a state, and he argues that power has become more evenly distributed, and impossible to centralize to such a degree. This seems like a semantic dispute: since an empire is heterogeneous, historically they have often been extremely decentralized, and some IGOs do resemble empires. The main reason for the evening out of power is communications technology, and this results in a complex, emergent dynamic, and tension with the old power structures.

Another concept mentioned by Rosenau is “neo-medievalism.” This is an analogy to medieval Europe, which had multiple overarching structures – including religious, ethnic and feudal – along with a highly decentralized system of feudal lords and landowners, many with private militia, and the common use of mercenaries. The concept evokes the complexity associated with a decentralized, hyperpolar world, with various co-existing political structures and a broad range of actors. van Creveld's vision may be closest to this: political structures will be “more fragmented, more integrated” and “they will also tend to form hierarchical relationships with one another.²⁶”

These possibilities describe similar phenomena and are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that all will coexist with each other, in which neo-medievalism might be the best

22 Van Creveld, *Rise and Decline of the State*, p. 49.

23 Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State* p. 57

24 Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*. p. 119.

25 Ibid p. 120.

26 Van Creveld, *Rise and Decline of the State*, p.418

description. But the world map of the future will not consist of clearly delineated nation-states. The systems of government will have transformed, and the nation-state, whatever replaces it, will seem anachronistic. Integration and fragmentation challenge state sovereignty; non-state actors are gaining in power, and transnational threats respect no borders. Nationalism has waned, and with it the threat of total war. These are the final years of the nation-state.

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