

**Title:**

“Bringing International Politics Back In”: Reconceptualising State Failure for the Twenty-First Century

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## **“Bringing International Politics Back In”: Reconceptualising State Failure for the Twenty-First Century**

The paper argues that the failed state phenomenon is not unique to the post-Cold War era, nor is it uniquely threatening in comparison with other historical periods. The paper contends that state failure is not primarily a failure of formal institutions of governance but a subjective condition defined by the great powers. “Bringing international politics back in” is essential to a clear understanding of the issue for an emerging multipolar international system of the twenty-first century. The paper draws on classical realist and critical constructivist perspectives to define state failure before developing a theoretical framework to reconceptualise the issue in historical and international systemic context. Interpretations of state failure are based on the interplay of contingent transnational threats with the distribution of capabilities in the international system, the pattern of order in the international society, and the sensitivity of the domestic politics of leading actors to risk. The paper draws some implications of this for the coming decades of the twenty-first century.

The international relations (IR) discipline in the post-Cold War era has been afflicted with a chronic case of what in historiography is termed “presentism”. The fallacy of presentism is the provincial idea that we in the present stand at the apex of human achievement and that our opportunities and problems are of greater moment than those faced in the past. This is particularly evident in the proliferating academic and policy literature on state failure and state-building. The failed state phenomenon is held to be either unique to the post-Cold War era, or with the shock of 9/11, especially pernicious in an increasingly interconnected world (Helman and Ratner 1992: 3; Orr 2004: 7; US Department of Defense 2008: 2-3). Even the most cursory historical survey, however, shows that peripheral disorder from ineffectually governed political spaces has been a ubiquitous feature of past imperial and international systems, and a perennial thorn in the side of the most powerful actors.

State failure cannot be defined solely by empirical indicators that seek to measure its causes or consequences. [1] State failure has an objective and subjective dimension, and both are essential to its conceptualisation. The objective dimension of state failure is the inability of weak governments to control the territories and

populations for which they are responsible to the international society. Transnational security risk is inherent to this empirical condition. Many states have exhibited this characteristic, however, and it is not sufficient to be designated a failed state. What constitutes state failure is also a subjective political judgement made by the elite decision-makers of leading states. This judgement is based on the sensitivity of great powers to particular types of transnational disorder and insecurity generated from the periphery in differing historical periods. Political labelling is important because it shapes policy (Litwak 2001: 376). A designation of state failure delegitimises the polity in question, reinforces the principles of international order, and invokes the precautionary responsibility of capable states to manage transnational risk.

This article will contend that the current focus on state institutions is flawed, and can at best provide only a partial understanding of the failed state phenomenon. I argue that state failure is not unique to the post-Cold War era, nor is it uniquely threatening in comparison with other historical periods. State failure is not only a failure of institutions of governance. It is also a subjective condition defined by the great powers. An interpretation of state failure is based on the interplay of contingent transnational threats with the distribution of capabilities in the international system, the pattern of order in the international society, and the sensitivity of the domestic polities of leading actors to risk. [2]

The post-Cold War failed state phenomenon is a product of the change in the structure of the international system from bipolar to unipolar; a changed pattern of order that assumes universal movement toward a global liberal-democratic order as normative; and acute domestic political sensitivity in Western states to transnational threats transmitted through the processes of globalisation. The internal conditions of many contemporary failed states were independent of these systemic changes. Many

postcolonial states in Africa and elsewhere have demonstrated the material conditions of state failure since their inception (Jackson 2000: 296; Caplan 2007: 231). That juridical statehood can no longer be extinguished is a property of a postcolonial pattern of order, not the material conditions of the failed state. Elements of this argument will not be new to critical scholars (Ayoob 1995: 59-60; Holm 2001: 361; Milliken and Krause 2002: 764). What is new in this article is the examination of state failure in past systemic structures to develop a framework for probabilistic future prediction.

This article develops a reconceptualisation of state failure for the emerging multipolar international order of the twenty-first century. The approach taken here is both historically-grounded, and unlike most writing on failed states, draws explicitly on IR theoretical perspectives. Historical knowledge cannot predict specific events, but regularities in collective human behaviour over time can provide a valid and useful guide for future action (Carr 1964: 68-9). In addition to a lack of historical sensitivity, state failure is notoriously under-theorised, which is obvious in the absence of any consensus on its definition. The difficulty in defining what constitutes fragile, failing or failed states derives from the flawed assumptions entrenched in dominant approaches to the issue area. Institutional accounts of state failure and state-building contain a number of shibboleths that this article will expose as questionable.

The article proceeds through five sections. The following section critiques the assumption that contemporary failed states are unique or uniquely threatening, thereby establishing the historical basis for state failure. The second section critiques the article of faith that institutions of governance are the primary causal factors for state effectiveness and failure. The third section draws on classical realist and critical constructivist perspectives to define state failure. The fourth section outlines an

analytical framework to reconceptualise state failure in international systemic context. The conclusion draws some broad implications from this reconceptualisation for the coming decades of the twenty-first century.

### **State Failure: Unique or Uniquely Threatening?**

State failure began to acquire prominence in academic and policy circles in the early 1990s. Gerald B. Helman and Stephen R. Ratner (1992: 3) described a ‘disturbing new phenomenon’: ‘the failed nation state, utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community’. The concept gained widespread currency with the publication of Robert D. Kaplan’s influential 1994 article, ‘The Coming Anarchy’, in which endemic regional chaos in West Africa was placed in a lexicon of transnational security. The “pathologies” of state failure had become a commonplace by the end of the 1990s. Internally, failed states were characterised by corrupt and disintegrating institutions, endemic civil war along ethnic lines, horrific human rights abuses and intractable poverty. Externally, failed states generated massive refugee flows, epidemic diseases, facilitated transnational crime and terrorism, and exported a contagious instability and disorder to regional neighbours.

In the wake of 9/11, the assertion that the most serious security threats in an interconnected world now emanate from the small, weak and failed, has become something of a mantra. Robert C. Orr (2004: 7) argues that ‘although weak, failed, and defeated states have long been a part of the international landscape, the threat they pose today to the United States and the civilised world is greater than ever’. Leading the agenda of security challenges in the 2008 US National Defense Strategy is the reiteration that ‘ungoverned, undergoverned, misgoverned and contested areas’

provide fertile grounds for terrorists to operate with impunity (US Department of Defense 2008: 2-3).

These empirical conditions and their transnational effects cannot be considered as substantially new or unique, as recognised by a number of scholars (Jackson 1990: 22-3; Herbst 2004: 303). The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, and the First Chinese Republic, for example, exhibited many of the above characteristics and at a human cost far exceeding that of contemporary state failure. Similarly, the “new” or “network” wars of the post-Cold War era of globalisation are characterised as identity or ethnic-based internal conflicts weaving ‘back and forth across borders to form regionalized systems of instability’. Parties to these conflicts exploit and target civilians as part of their war strategy dedicated to the pursuit of narrow sectarian interests (Duffield 2002: 1051). It is difficult to discern how these internal material conditions differ in any meaningful way from the ethnic cleansing, irredentist claims, persecution of minorities, warlord violence and refugee flows characteristic of these past examples.

Also profoundly misleading is Mark Duffield’s (2001: 15-16) thesis that ‘the modalities of underdevelopment have become dangerous and destabilising’ in the post-Cold War era, leading to a radical merger of development and security. Duffield (2005: 20) argues, that ‘with the crisis of state-based security’ after the Cold War, ‘development has discovered a new strategic role’. Yet modernisation theory was deployed by the United States during the Cold War for precisely this reason (Latham 2000). Communist insurgencies in the Third World were believed to be directly linked to underdevelopment, “scavengers” on the dislocation and instability generated by the inexorable forces of global modernisation (Packenham 1973: 52; Gaddis 1982: 208). This Cold War thinking is strikingly analogous to current claims that the only

answer to the security challenges of weak and failing states in a globalising world must rest with development, hence the dominant focus on institutions of governance.

A sharp distinction is erroneously made in the literature between the inter-state security risks of weak governments during the Cold War and the transnational security threats of contemporary state failure. Both derive from the same empirical source: the presence of transnational risk due to the inability of weak governments to effectively control the territories and populations for which they are responsible. Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Keohane (1972: xii) define transnational activity as ‘the movement of tangible or intangible items across state boundaries when at least one actor is not an agent of a government or an intergovernmental organization’. The examples of multinational enterprises, revolutionary movements and trade unions are cited as purveyors of such transnational activity. They further make the important point that transnational activity ‘increases the sensitivity of societies to one another and thereby alters relationships between governments’ (Nye and Keohane 1972: xvi).

In multipolar and bipolar systemic structures, transnational security issues generated by revolutionary or terrorist activity, political instability and civil unrest, ethnic conflicts and people movements, have been acutely felt by states as potential threats in strategic calculations, whether as an opportunity to a competitor or a liability to one’s own interests. States have also sponsored or coopted transnational movements as elements of their foreign policies. The sharp distinction currently made between transnational and international issues is therefore misplaced. The failed state is not an inter-state security threat in itself, but a source of non-conventional or transnational security issues that may give rise to inter-state tensions and conflict between great powers in multipolar and bipolar contexts.

For example, the failure of the ramshackle Ottoman State unleashed virulent transnational ethnic conflicts in the Balkans serving also to destabilise Austria-Hungary. Ottoman disintegration also prompted Arab proto-nationalisms and Pan-Islamism across North Africa, perceived as profoundly threatening by Britain and France. After the slaughter of the Crimean War (1854-56), Russia, Britain and France were brought to the brink of armed conflict on a number of occasions in the late nineteenth century over the “Eastern Question”. Transnational ethnic conflicts on the Balkan fringe of the derelict Habsburg State were also the catalyst for simmering European tensions that led to the First World War. After 1945, state failure during the Cold War raised the acute risk for US policymakers that transnational insurgent movements might trigger a “free world” collapse in the postcolonial periphery (Eisenhower 1953: 591-2; Dulles 1954: 593-6). The failure of the Republic of Vietnam between 1959 and 1975 cost the lives of some three million Indochinese, fifty thousand US servicemen, and carried the risk of a second Sino-American war. It is unclear why the transnational issues preoccupying us in the present should be the only ones of salience in thinking about state failure.

There is no evidence, however, that the term “state failure” was used in the past, although analogous discourses and descriptors can be found in documentary records and historical accounts. The standard of civilisation in European international law differentiated between semi-civilised, barbarous and savage polities based on their relative capacities to demonstrate appropriate properties of statehood to the international society (Schwarzenberger 1955; Gong 1984). Discourses of state “collapse” are common in both nineteenth century British foreign policy documents dealing with the semi-colonial Ottoman periphery, and in United States’ Cold War diplomacy relating to the Third World. Delegitimising labels were also attached in

particular cases. The Ottoman Empire was the “sick man of Europe”. Republican China was a “foreign office attached to chaos”. President John F. Kennedy was warned by J. K. Galbraith not to become involved with “jungle regimes” whose writ runs as far as the international airport (Ninkovich 1994: 267).

The dire situation in West Africa reported by Robert Kaplan in 1994 was presciently forecast by George F. Kennan and described by Hugh Tinker during the process of African decolonisation some thirty years earlier. In a letter to Walt W. Rostow, Kennan (1962: 290-1) observed,

You have a vision ... of a humane Africa, divided into God knows how many independent states, all with neat borders, U.N. membership, and all the other trappings of sovereignty on the western pattern ... I see ahead in this area, no matter what we do: primarily ... bewilderment, inexperience, violence, racial hatred, and internecine strife of every sort ... we should have a policy towards these people ... devoid of illusions about their probable future, devoid in particular of any fond belief that they are going to grow in our image ...

In 1964, Hugh Tinker (1967: 44) accurately foreshadowed Robert Jackson’s (1990) “quasi-state” thesis in his depiction of the “broken-backed” postcolonial states of East Africa:

The State will enjoy full international recognition and membership of the United Nations ... both the “free world” and the Communist bloc will provide aid and advice ... with total absence of effect. The government may be elected or self-appointed. The ministers will promote enlightened legislation which will never be implemented ... Representatives of the central government will be stationed in the districts ... but their writ will not run as far as the compound wall. The real power in the districts will be exercised by the men of force ... [who] run their own small private armies ... Then there will be the underground of resistance leaders, who are quite frankly bandits, and who levy their tribute from the peasants as well as the townspeople. Finally, there will be army or military police ... exercising their protection with a heavy hand.

The internal conditions of state failure typified in the contemporary literature are not unique to the post-Cold War period. Nor is it plausible to assume that the transnational security risks generated by state failure in the present are uniquely threatening or dangerous.

### **The Poverty of Institutional Approaches to State Failure**

The institutional approach to state failure represents a direct importation into political science of the “new institutional” economics (NIE) prominent since the early 1990s. [3] It has become an article of faith that state failure represents a failure of governance, and that appropriate institutional promotion can therefore “fix” failed states (see Ghani and Lockhart 2008). A 2005 paper from Britain’s Department for International Development (DFID) states unequivocally ‘that the central driver of fragility is weak institutions. All other factors associated with fragility are in themselves linked to weak state institutions as a driving force’ (Vallings and Moreno-Torres 2005: 7). The intense renewal of emphasis on formal institutions rests on the correlation between security and socio-economic development (Rotberg 2004: 71). This has resulted in the flawed assumption that formal institutions of governance are the primary causal variables for state effectiveness. [4]

The basic assumptions of the NIE are that institutions are not neutral and exert a significant effect on economic behaviour. Individuals will be utility-maximising ‘subject to the limits imposed by the existing institutional structure’ (Furubotn and Richter 2005: 36). In short, institutions matter: ‘they influence norms, beliefs, and actions; therefore, they shape outcomes’. Institutions are also ‘endogenous: their form and their functioning depend on the conditions in which they emerge and endure’ (Przeworski 2004: 527). Douglass C. North (1997: 224) asserts that ‘the primary source of economic growth is the institutional/organizational structure of a political economy ...’ Nations are underdeveloped because ‘institutional constraints define a set of payoffs to political/economic activity that do not encourage productive activity’ (North 1990: 110).

Institutions are defined as the “rules of the game” that reduce the uncertainty inherent in human interaction by establishing stable and orderly behavioural patterns. The institutional framework of a society is conceived as having ‘three components: formal rules, informal rules, and enforcement mechanisms’ (Yeager 1998: 9). Formal institutions consist of the rules codified in constitutions, legislation and administrative regulation. Informal institutions are the society’s unwritten rules of conduct. They are defined by culture, norms, and shared attitudes and assumptions, some of which are more conducive to development than others. The third component of the institutional framework is enforcement. Some institutions will be ineffective if not enforced, while informal rules based on moral or cultural norms will be self enforced by the majority of people in cohesive societies (Yeager 1998: 9-10).

The NIE recognises that informal institutions may impede the effectiveness of formal institutions. However, the predominant approach of the NIE is that formal institutional frameworks, based on the model of advanced industrialised democracies, can influence and shape culture and thereby alter development outcomes. Mancur Olson (2000: 59) stresses that an appropriate structure of incentives is crucial to economic development. Institutions must provide an impartial rule of law, foster creativity and entrepreneurship, reduce transaction costs in capital markets to encourage investment, and allow for a competitive economic environment that forces continual improvement by firms (Yeager 1998: 44, 48-51).

Institutional economics tends to downplay the reverse causation that formal institutional frameworks are expressions of power relations and cultural factors, or, as in the United States, the constitutional expression of a political philosophy. In critiquing the international community’s current passion for “institutional engineering”, Adam Przeworski (2004: 527) makes ‘the embarrassingly obvious

observation that if endogeneity is strong, then institutions cannot have a causal efficacy of their own'. Conditions shape institutions. Formal institutions, whether indigenous or externally-promoted, can only transmit the causal effects of 'the conditions that gave rise to them'. Institutions are epiphenomenal. They transmit social power relations and cultural norms that lie elsewhere (Przeworski 2004: 527-8). At best, formal institutions can only be an intervening rather than a primary causal variable in any explanatory schema.

Dominant approaches to the issue assume that states fail because of ineffective institutions of governance. Yet if institutions are endogenous, with form and function contingent on the historical conditions in which they emerge, state failure must then derive from these underlying conditions. The power relations that shape states' institutional structures have an international and domestic dynamic. What constitutes appropriate state institutions in any historical period is defined by the most powerful actors in conformity with the prevailing pattern of order in the international society. To enjoy genuine international legitimacy, domestic political institutions must approximate prevailing norms of appropriate statehood, whether the stable rational-bureaucratic framework of the nineteenth century or the liberal-democratic capitalist institutional architecture of the present.

State weakness and its pathologies, such as underdevelopment; derive from the incongruence of informal institutions, i.e., local power relations and cultural norms, with externally-generated formal institutional structures. The patterns of the past suggest that not all political communities can be socialised to international norms of statehood as defined by leading actors at any given time. The multi-ethnic Ottoman and Habsburg imperial states of the nineteenth century were unable to adapt to the emerging norm of nation-statehood. Conversely, if formal institutional structures,

such as those inherited by Sub-Saharan African and Melanesian states on decolonisation, do not reflect indigenous power relations and cultural values, they will not function as intended or deliver the political outcomes anticipated. This is not to suggest that power relations and cultural forms are immutable, but that their evolution occurs only at a glacial pace. [5] The causal efficacy that indigenous power relations and cultural values will transmit through institutional structures is immediate, whereas reciprocal influence is weaker and may take generations.

A necessary congruence between power relations, cultural forms and formal institutions has long been recognised. Cicero (1976: 131) held that the ‘deliberating authority’ of a commonwealth ‘must always be relative to the peculiar grounds which have brought the particular state into being’. Thomas Aquinas (1970: 133) made the similar point that ‘laws when they are passed should take account of the condition of the men who will be subject to them ...’ The system of ‘law should be “possible both with regard to nature and with regard to the custom of the country”’ (Isidore cited in Aquinas 1970: 133).

NIE perspectives put their faith in the assumption that ‘change in formal institutions can lead to a change in long-held cultural values and beliefs’ (Yeager 1998: 44-5). This is clearly a reversal of the direction of causation in the development of institutional structures in advanced industrial states. Historically, the establishment and evolution of successful formal institutional structures has been the product of culture-bound informal institutions and deeper belief systems. While there are some successful cases in East Asia of institutional promotion and adaptation, the chronic underdevelopment and insecurity of large parts of the “developing” world should sound a cautionary note. It should be remembered that states such as Japan and South Korea that have successfully assimilated Western institutional structures are culturally

homogenous with long “national” histories and rational-bureaucratic traditions (Fukuyama 2004: 30). These attributes fortuitously coincided with the conceptual boundaries of the postcolonial sovereign state. These conditions are not present in many other parts of the postcolonial developing world where social allegiances may be sub-national, transnational, supra-national in Islamic societies, or a combination.

### **From Weak to Failed: Constructing State Failure**

State failure is a condition with long historical antecedents. It is not caused primarily by a failure of domestic institutions. Theoretical insights from classical realism, and social constructivist and critical theory perspectives on post-Cold War liberal international order provide useful points of departure in defining state failure. Social facts such as state failure are not “ideas *all the way down*” (Wendt 1999: 371). Culture, as Alexander Wendt (1999: 371) argues, must supervene on nature. Classical realism provides the empirical basis for state failure. Hans J. Morgenthau (1978: 322-3) has made the distinction between the political fact of sovereignty as a matter of judgement by other states, and the legal principle of juridical statehood. Morgenthau (1978: 322-3) allows for sovereignty to ‘be in temporary suspense if the actual distribution of power within a territory remains unsettled’. He also asserted that ‘weak states’, or ‘politically empty spaces’, represent power vacuums that encourage intervention and interference (Morgenthau 1978: 59).

Francis Fukuyama (2004: 6) argues that ‘the essence of stateness’ is strength, or ‘*enforcement*’; the capacity to meet the minimal Weberian definition of statehood as ‘a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory’ (Weber 1948: 78). Weak states are those unable to enforce their will across the scope of governmental responsibilities

(Fukuyama 2004: 6-13). Simon Chesterman, Michael Ignatieff and Ramesh Thakur (2005: 1) make the important point that, while central government may be ineffective or absent in weak state jurisdictions, politics carries on in these “politically empty spaces”. Non-state actors will ‘exercise varying degrees of political power’. Transnational risk and uncertainty is inherent to an empirical condition that allows malevolent or destabilising actors to operate free from the control of governments.

From a critical constructivist perspective, the failed state phenomenon can be seen not only in the context of a concerted attempt to homogenise a global liberal-democratic order in the post-Cold War period. It can also be seen as an integral part of an assertive drive by the sovereign states-system to reproduce itself, in the wake of perceived challenges to its ontological primacy. Wendt (1999: 10-11) has argued that ‘the state-centric “project” includes an effort to reproduce not only their own identity, but that of the system of which they are parts: states in the *plural*’. In the 1990s, these challenges were mainly associated with the processes of globalisation. Since 9/11, the challenge to the international system has been acutely felt in the threat perception generated by non-state terrorist actors. Well-socialised actors will instinctively defend their culture when it is threatened (Wendt 1999: 337).

Globalisation has generated negative externalities that have compelled capable states to actively and explicitly reassert sovereign authority. The most obvious are the risks associated with the informal global economy such as transnational crime, illegal immigration and potential disease pandemics. Perhaps less obvious, the deregulation required by states to participate in the global economy has had the intended effect of externalising risk from transnational capital to domestic societies, where it has been deeply internalised by individuals and families (Cox 1996: 196; Gill 2003: 125-6, 136-7). The absorption of greater socio-economic risk and uncertainty has generated

countervailing pressures for state intervention and protection. As a result, and contrary to the neo-liberal tenets of the 1990s, the role of the wealthy core states has expanded, both in scope and strength, to one of direct management and amelioration of the profound risk perception of their security-conscious and politically-disengaged constituents (Furedi 2005).

The sense of uncertainty and risk engendered by an expanding and deepening globalisation process was exacerbated exponentially by the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC. The attack on the core of the unipolar international system by a non-state actor seemingly motivated by religious fundamentalism and disseminating a civilisational rather than state-centric discourse, prompted a vigorous reassertion of interest defined as security. Since then, the discourse and practice of international politics has returned from the globalism of the 1990s, to a more resolute statism. The ubiquitous use of terms such as “war” on terror and “homeland security”; the Hitlerite comparisons made of “rogue” states; openly realist US discourses of pre-emption, prevention, and peer competitors; and a return to inter-state warfare with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, are all indicative of concerted action by core states to reassert the ontological primacy of the states-system. This is also illustrated by the strict “border protection” regimes initiated in recent years.

That the “failed” state has only emerged as a serious concern to Western policymakers in the post-Cold War period is due to changes in the ideational structure of the international system. Core Western states assumed that with the end of strategic bipolarity, the international pattern of order, considered in English School terms, would move from pluralism toward liberal-democratic solidarism. With the easing of both the deeply entrenched ideational frameworks and material constraints of the Cold War, cultural change in the post-1945 international system accelerated in the early

1990s. The international culture of permissiveness toward the postcolonial “negative sovereignty” regime shifted to one of surveillance and intervention in the internal processes of weak states to discipline them to the norms of the emerging liberal international order.

The relational ontology of a constructivist approach allows the “role” of failed state to be constituted only in relation to a social structure of shared knowledge. Structures place social facts ‘in relationships of conceptual necessity’ to others, in that they are mutually constitutive (Wendt 1999: 84-5, 227-8). The “failed” state could not antecedently “exist” until externally constituted as such in relation to the “appropriate” state, as defined within a structure of shared knowledge. The failed state has been ideationally constituted in relation to the redefinition of the appropriate properties of statehood in the post-Cold War era. State failure is *necessary* to the homogenising project of liberal international order. The failure of the liberal international project to penetrate and restructure significant numbers of weak, postcolonial states cannot be ideologically countenanced by its protagonists. Responsibility for this failure must rest with the internal properties of certain weak states, now constituted as failed.

One of the main insights of a social constructivist perspective is that social facts constituted by collective intentionality will exert material effects. The attacks on the United States by a non-state actor operating from the territory of a designated failed state prompted another ideational change in the relative positioning of state failure in the social structure of international order. In the post-9/11 period, the failed state has been ideationally reconstituted as a threat to the international system itself. This is a ‘constitutive requirement’ of a ‘collective identity’ reformation that positions the failed state as other to reinforce the “‘common in-group identity’” of the states-

system (Wendt 1999: 338). Only in a structure of strategic unipolarity could a non-state actor be conceived as threatening the very fabric of the international system.

The material base of the failed state is its inability to effectively control its population and territory. Transnational risk is inherent to this empirical condition. The content of the transnational threat embodying that risk is contingent on historical context. Since 9/11, this material base supports an ideational superstructure that vastly overexaggerates the importance of state failure as a transnational security threat. The failed state has become integral to the assertive reproduction of the culture and practices of the international system.

### **Bringing International Politics Back In: Reconceptualising State Failure**

This theoretical analysis suggests that movement from state weakness to failure is partly a subjective condition defined by the sensitivity of great powers to particular types of transnational threat in particular historical periods. This section develops a three-part framework to reconceptualise state failure. State failure is constituted by the configuration of three variables: the distribution of capabilities, the pattern of order in the international society, and the domestic political sensitivity of leading actors to transnational risk. An interpretation of state failure is located conceptually at the nexus of systemic structure and the incidence of a transnational threat emanating from weak states. What constitutes a transnational threat is subjective; both facilitated by and judged against the contingent pattern of order in international society. The distribution of capabilities and domestic political sensitivity of leading actors to certain types of risks determines whether transnational disorder from weak states *matters* to great powers. Domestic risk sensitivity functions as a powerful negative constraint precluding action or inaction in particular cases.

The geographical location of state failure is solely a function of systemic structure, whether multipolar, bipolar or unipolar. In multipolar systems, weak states will be designated as failed only if they are in areas of strategic importance to the great powers. In bipolar and unipolar systems, by contrast, everything matters in geographical terms. The experience of the Cold War suggests, however, that transnational risk from weak states will be viewed as more threatening by great powers when located close to home or within operational reach of the adversary. In a unipolar system, all weak states are of interest to the hegemon, but the intensity of that interest will be uneven and often marginal unless the risk is embodied by transnational behaviours perceived as deeply threatening to the pattern of order. In the current unipolar system, domestic risk sensitivity to transnational threats is high due to 9/11 and the “CNN effect” of global media coverage. The relative commitment of resources to contemporary failed states by policymakers tends to be shallower than in multipolar and bipolar systems, however, due to their greater numbers and the lack of intense strategic competition.

The pattern of order in the international society may be heterogeneous and pluralist, or homogenising and solidarist. Heterogeneous international orders recognise the ontological equality of bounded political communities and incorporate norms of self-determination and reciprocal non-intervention. In patterns of order that are pluralistic, with acceptance of differing regime forms and minimal standards for state behaviour, the threshold for transnational threats will be higher than in homogenising international orders. The incidence of state failure will be correspondingly lower. The ordering principles of international society may also be homogenising or solidarist. In solidarist international orders, hegemonic actors hold that an idealised version of their own form of governance is universal. State identities

and behaviours that deviate from this normative standard will attract moral and material sanction. In patterns of order based on homogeneity in state identities and behaviours, the threshold for transnational threats and the designation of state failure will be much lower than in pluralistic international orders. Heterogeneous patterns of order are possible in all systemic configurations. Homogeneous patterns of order are the sole preserve of unipolar systems and will reflect the deontological claims of the hegemon.

The sensitivity of domestic polities to risk is also critical in interpreting what constitutes a transnational threat and in designating state failure. The concept of risk is indelibly modern and secular, linked with rapid expansions in science, technology, education and information. Risk management is associated with aspirations to normalise and control the future in order to avoid 'unwanted outcomes' (Giddens 1999: 4). Risks cannot be identified and managed without reference to the values they are perceived to threaten, and are always related to security, safety and responsibility conceived as obligation or liability (Giddens 1999: 5-8). The extent of transnational behaviours that will be interpreted as threatening to leading actors is positively correlated with states' perceived capacity to manage such risks and control future outcomes. A greater capacity to manage and control risk carries a greater precautionary responsibility to do so. [6] Domestic risk sensitivity to state weakness will be highest among core actors in international systems: the most secure, prosperous, and technologically-advanced polities. It is a reasonable assumption that in the West, domestic risk sensitivity has progressively increased from early to late-modernity, as state capacity and responsibility has gradually expanded into more and more spheres of social life.

In the European system of the nineteenth century, proximate transnational disorder in the Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East were of greatest concern to British policymakers. The pattern of order in international society was heterogeneous, based on the emerging “standard of civilisation” in international law. A civilised state was to retain a rational bureaucratic structure, maintain adequate and permanent channels for diplomacy, accept the European system of international law and be able to uphold its commitments under law, and exercise control over a defined territory (Gong 1984: 14-15). The concept of risk and its management was beginning to be recognised and understood as reflexive of ‘the tumultuous Victorian moment of modernity’ (Freedgood 2003: 1). Risk could be displaced to cultural or geographical locations outside the pale of late-Victorian Britain. But industrial modernity revealed how acutely Britain needed ‘the outside world – for resources, markets, as well as for physical and psychological space’ (Freedgood 2003: 9). While it was psychologically necessary for risk to be displaced and managed in potentially hazardous locations such as Ireland, the Orient, or Africa, large parts of the world also needed to be represented as orderly and safe, especially those locations deemed essential to the prosperity and prestige of Empire (Freedgood 2003: 9, 169).

In the bipolar Cold War system of relative nuclear parity, “national liberation” movements and communist insurgencies on the Asian periphery of the communist bloc and in the Western hemisphere were viewed by American policymakers as deeply threatening. Gains to communism through internal subversion or transnational insurgencies would lead to an erosion of American credibility everywhere, resulting in further strategic losses. The post-1945 pattern of international order was based on UN Charter principles of self-determination, sovereign equality and non-interference in internal jurisdictions. The impetus for gradual, selective and orderly decolonisation

was overtaken in 1960 with the General Assembly declaration of the unconditional and categorical right of all colonial peoples to independence and juridical statehood without reservation. Outside the communist sphere and non-aligned states, the United States fashioned a broadly liberal, open and rule-based anti-communist order with the consent of West European and Asian partners (Ikenberry 2005: 133). Acute risk sensitivity pervaded American society during the Cold War. Confronting an alien, hostile and seemingly inexorable communist expansionism in which the risk of nuclear annihilation was inherent and sometimes palpable prompted deep insecurities and collective uncertainties. Risk sensitivity was most acutely felt in possible threats to international order that carried the potential to escalate to nuclear war.

This reconceptualisation suggests that state failure is amenable to probabilistic prediction. If, as seems likely, the international system moves towards multipolarity and greater acceptance of heterogeneity in regime form, the numbers of failed states in the future will be fewer. New descriptors for failure may be found. Weak states will be of greatest concern to policymakers if they are close to home or located in regions subject to strategic competition. Elsewhere weak states will attract less attention and resources. Non-state actor identities and transnational behaviours emanating from weak states will be viewed as malevolent and threatening primarily if they carry the risk of interference from other powers. The pattern of past international systems suggests that national prestige will be a crucial factor in an emerging multipolar context, especially for declining status-quo powers, but also among rising or resurgent powers. Domestic political sensitivity in a multipolar system is likely to become acute where state weakness attracts interference from strategic competitors. The recent Russian intervention in Georgia may already provide evidence for this.

**Conclusion: Implications for the Twenty-First Century**

With the demise of the Washington Consensus, the state has been well and truly brought “back in” to development economics and derivative institutional approaches to state failure. This article has argued that the current focus on state institutions is flawed, and can at best provide only a partial understanding of the failed state phenomenon. The article has shown that “bringing international politics back in” is essential to a clear reconceptualisation of the issue for the emerging multipolar international system of the twenty-first century. State failure is not unique to the post-Cold War era, nor is it uniquely threatening in comparison with other historical periods. State failure is not primarily a failure of domestic institutions of governance. State failure is also a subjective condition defined by the great powers. Interpretations of state failure are based on the interplay of transnational threats with the distribution of capabilities in the international system, the pattern of order in the international society, and the sensitivity of the domestic politics of leading actors to risk.

The collapse of Soviet communism is regarded as an epochal event portending a new era of human security in a global liberal-democratic order. A longer historical perspective suggests that the Cold War clash of ideologies was itself the anomaly. An emerging twenty-first century multipolar system is likely to mark the return of a more typical pattern of international politics (Gray 2003: 44, 59-61). The geographical zones of chronic state weakness are in resource rich areas of the world such as the Caucasus, Middle East, West Africa and Central Asia. These regions will increasingly become the subject of intense energy security competition among a heterogeneous group of great powers which may be authoritarian such as China, illiberal democracies such as Russia or post-colonial democracies as in India. The “good” governance and human security concerns elicited by contemporary state failure and

the liberal state-building agenda are likely to diminish in importance for Western policymakers as the twenty-first century international system returns to multipolarity and plurality.

The strategic imperative for disciplinary interventions in states deemed to be failed is likely to be more compelling in a multipolar context than in the post-Cold War period. However, the timing, mode, objectives and duration of such interventions will be heavily constrained by the exigencies of systemic competition. Although the internal material conditions of weak states may experience little substantive change, the coming multipolar international system is likely to be perceived as more stable and orderly than the turbulent period of the immediate post-Cold War and subsequent “war on terror”.

### Notes

1. For example, the *Foreign Policy*/Fund for Peace (2008: 66) ‘Failed States Index’ uses twelve empirical indicators to rank ‘states in order of their vulnerability to violent internal conflict and societal deterioration’.
2. International society is understood here in English School terms as ‘a group of states’ that ‘conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions’ (Bull 1977: 13). The international society may be pluralist or solidarist in its ordering principles (Bull 1966: 52).
3. Although related, the NIE is to be distinguished from the various “new institutionalisms” in political science: for example Hall and Taylor (1996) and Peters (1998). The institutional approach to state failure sees socio-economic development as the ultimate remedy for state fragility. The formal institutions to be promoted or reconstituted are directed primarily towards development and reflect the assumptions of the NIE.
4. The limitations of institutional approaches to state capacity have been noted by a number of scholars; see for example, Leftwich (2000), Hameiri (2007).
5. This point suggested by O. Yul Kwon, Australian Centre for Korean Studies, Griffith University.
6. On the precautionary principle in foreign policy; see McLean and Patterson (2006).

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael Wesley, Jason Sharman, Martin Griffiths, Stephen McCarthy, Michael Heazle and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts. Any mistakes remain the responsibility of the author. I also gratefully acknowledge scholarship funding from Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University.

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